Sir Arum and the Green Knight
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Lord Arum (Penumbra Podcast), Sir Damien (Penumbra Podcast), Rilla (Penumbra Podcast), Sir Marc (Penumbra Podcast), Quanyii (Penumbra Podcast), Sir Angelo (Penumbra Podcast), Olala (Penumbra Podcast)

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Sir Arum and the Green Knight

by SpaceJackalope

Summary

A Second Citadel twist on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight for the 2020 Penumbra Mini Bang!

GREEN KNIGHT: hi hi
come over
it'll be fun
we can whack off each other's heads with swords

[ARUM]: what

GREEN KNIGHT: you can make out with my wife

[ARUM]: sorry what

GREEN KNIGHT: you can make out with me

[ARUM]: what?

GREEN KNIGHT: come over
we'll have dinner
with all our heads on and also clothes

(Summary tweaked from Daniel Lavery, see end notes for link.)

Notes

A fic I've wanted to write for a long time, brought to life for the Penumbra Mini Bang!

Incredibly beautiful official art by:

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Kindly beta read by Lena!

See the end of the work for more notes

Fitt I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once the siege and assault of the First Citadel had ceased,

With the city a smoke-heap of cinders and ash,

The monsters' approach laced with the truest treachery on earth;

Three brothers, sainted hence, there made their stand.

Saint Aaron, with his hammer,

Saint Damien, with his spear,

Saint Ferdinand, with his slingshot.

These our heroes, esteemed above all, turned ash to fertilizer,

Turned the land lush, let it bloom with blisses and blunders

In equal measure.

So sayeth raconteurs for generations; so repeateth I.

The Second Citadel--center of more strangeness than anywhere else I know.

Small wonder that their heroes heat our hearts and move our minds!

This is a tale topsy-turvy and toothsome. Listen, if you like;

I will tell you unerringly how I heard it, from ones who were there.

A rare tale with no mirror; for as no human will tell you I lie, neither will any monster.

Listen. This is as it was, when dwelled here a knight named Arum.

⁂

Arum awoke disoriented, his mouth cotton-dry and his limbs hot. He untangled himself from the bedclothes and poured himself a drink of

water from a cut-glass carafe on the nightstand. Less groggy, he took stock of his body, feeling slickness between his legs and supposing his dreams had at least been pleasant ones. There was not enough of the vision in his mind to help himself satisfy the vision in his body, so he squirmed and sighed and hauled himself to his washstand. He was a fine-looking man, Sir Arum, a knight of the crown in the full flower of youth, copper-haired, violet-eyed, with scores of freckles across his body, itself trim and tenacious and well-trained. He was cunning and courageous, more wit and swiftness than brawn, and as loved by the citizens of the Citadel as was his mother, the Queen.

He had a vague feeling there was something he'd forgotten, but there was no gain in dwelling on it, so he pressed on, dressing himself in tight black-and-blue brocade trousers, with a purple-and blue tunic of soft wool over it, and a wine-dark vest laced atop, and boots to match, for there was a bitter chill in the air. He braided his hair into a crown 'round his head, and finished his fashion with a ring on each hand. On the left, a rosy band with the constellation of his birth picked out in seed pearls, and on the right, silver shaped into a blade-like leaf, delicate diamonds of dew to catch the light.

Our knight had been napping after a hard day, not sleeping overnight, and now it was time to descend to the hall, where the court was assembling to toast the winter solstice. The courtiers were splendid in their splashiest styles, seated before tables groaning with succulent dishes. Arum hied to the high table, kissed his mother's cheek and settled into his seat. The Queen looked around, and when she was satisfied that all were present, she opened the feast with a musical trill of blessing and cheer, and all stomped their feet and clapped their hands, and clasped their neighbors' hands or kissed their brows. Each person took up a dish near to them, and served themselves before passing it along. Arum piled his plate with grilled eggplant, marinated mushrooms, carrots roasted in orange juice, crispy potato hash with peppers and garlic, a sourdough roll with cheddar baked into the crust, cranberry chutney, long-grained biryani rich with almonds, and a slice of artichoke quiche. There were desserts to come, he knew, and he had his heart set on coffee-cinnamon cheesecake and a scoop of pomegranate custard alongside.

On Arum's right was Florian the Fair, holly crowning his dreadlocks and mischief glowing in his eyes, who had been catching all his friends and gifting them sprigs of green, so when the exchange of dishes had stilled, he tapped Arum's wrist. "You're the last, so you've no choice of plant."

Arum laughed. “Very well, deal me my fate.” Florian fixed a posy of mistletoe behind the knight’s ear, threading the branch through his braid to anchor it.

“There now, dear friend, winter has come—a time to be shared, yes?”

Sir Arum’s face heated, and he folded his hands to give both his rings a comforting tap. His mother on the other side cast her eye skyward, while her boy stammered and stumbled through a deflection. “I already have—well, no, I suppose you’re right—well, perhaps we shall see.” Florian and his husband made no attempt to hide their laughter, poor Arum’s raspy voice rapid with reluctance. The knight tried to remember his last relationship, but his mind came up blank. He was sure he’d had lovers, his skin seemed to remember what it was to be touched, but he found he could remember neither names nor faces, and puzzled over his own failing, be it carelessness or callousness. It was unnerving, to be sure, and he tried to focus on his food, to bring his merry spirit back. Florian, to his credit, looked somewhat abashed, and offered to swap his crown for the mistletoe, but Arum shrugged it off. It was more festive than suggestive, and if he caught a kiss or two, then very well—let them warm him through.

As the party progressed, Arum’s cheer returned and redoubled, and well it may; for the food was heavenly and the jokes devilish. Once the plates were empty, the Queen indicated via aria that she wanted a volunteer, someone to tell the hall a tale and give them all a pause before dessert made its debut. This was met with grand approval, friends nudging each other. Arum felt a small pang in his chest, an inexplicable certitude that his favored raconteur was not at this regalement. But before the best boaster could stand and put up their hand, the grand double-doors swung inward to unveil a fresh adventure.

There was a fellow in the doorframe of astonishing appearance; little and limber, but biceps and thighs betraying strength as well. He rode astride a reindeer with a glossy chocolate-brown coat and golden baubles in her antlers, and held a recurve bow of wood nearly as dark. And he was handsome as the day, face framed by wind-whipped, snow-kissed curls, eyelashes as long as his deer’s, an elegant set to his posture and an expressive, intelligent mouth. Oh, he was fine, I swear it, but still the hall stared in befuddlement; for the stranger was entirely green.

His skin was the color of summer leaves, and veined in the same branching pattern, and his hair and eyes held the deep gorgeousness

of an emerald. He wore a knight's sides-slit gown of green as well, embroidered in every inch with a tableau of branches intertwining, bursting with birds nesting and bugs buzzing, bark and leaves and buds picked out with particular care which beggared belief. He was cinched at the waist with a green leather belt, wrapped several times round and pinned in place with a golden ornament in the shape of an oak leaf. His legs were clad much the same, in stripy silk leggings of green contrasted with another shade of itself, and when he shifted his arms, you could see the flash of golden mail beneath. His boots were short and shiny, the darkest green of all, laced with golden ribbon almost disarming in its delicacy, and in the side of his nose and the lobes of his ears winked studs of polished jade. There was as well, Arum thought, a crown of flowers in his hair, but as the strange man's reindeer brought him nearer, her hooves ringing surreally against the marble tile, he realized the honeysuckle blooms were sprouting from the man's scalp and tangling in his locks; and so his scent was as special and as strange to explain as the rest of him. It was impossible to fear him, when he looked so much like a lord gentle and genteel, but only a monster could have such a bizarre body. And yet…and yet, Arum had to admit, there was something human in his eyes.

The man stopped before the high table and bowed from the saddle. "Gracious Queen," he greeted, the first voice in the room since his entrance. "Your court is renown; in my land, they speak of your knights' courage and courteousness as though they have no limit. I find myself in a perplexing pickle; though I am not your subject, will you be generous to a noble traveler and loan me the ears of your knights? I promise to give them back." He winked charmingly, disarmingly, and Arum folded his arms across his chest. He found the proposition preposterous. Then he glanced to his left, at his mama the queen, her hands clasped in delight before her heart, eyes shining. She trilled her assent, signaling a squire to stable the reindeer and a second to bring the stranger a cushion. Had it been Arum's choice, he would have let the stranger stand and be brief; but the Queen was keen to hear the broad strokes of the journey he'd braved, and begged to know the stranger's name before he began. He bowed a second time, hand on his breastbone. "I am Lord Damien of…of the Green Keep, dear Queen, and I have roamed many lands without witnessing such a bevy of bravery and beauty as is present in your courtiers." He seated himself on the proffered cushion and went on to describe, in lavish detail, the diverse terrains he had trekked betwixt his Keep and her court, the Queen gleeful and glowing with every word.

"And now that I have arrived, honorable Queen, I ask for the attendance of a knight to fulfill a simple favor. It is no threat to life

nor limb, but I request a robust man; a lad untested by blade and blood would suit me very ill. No, let it be a seasoned man, strong and steady. It shall behoove me to bestow on your champion a trophy of unparalleled perfection, to testify their triumph and herald my heartfelt gratitude."

Arum put his head in his hands. "For the sake of all the stars, what is it you *want* ?"

Lord Damien looked wounded. "I'm getting to it."

"Slowly, honeysuckle. Like watching a lake freeze over."

"Is that how you spend your free time? I prefer poetry."

"Don't be silly, I like—you're doing it again!"

"Doing what?"

"Wasting time!

"Is your time so precious, friend knight? I thought this was a party."

There was a startling sparkle in the lord's eye, like he had no greater pleasure than to gently provoke Arum in particular. Said knight, frustrated and flustered, found himself pouting with a childish pique. He was conscious of every eye on him; he did not like to converse in public, so often did his words collide and convey coldness where he only wished to be quick and clear. Let Lord Damien hasten his speechifying; it was Arum's duty to display the honor and courage of the citadel, and deliver the stranger his due. "Forgive me if I don't find your intrusion relaxing. I'll take your challenge, if you'll just hurry up and tell me what it *is* ."

Lord Damien's smile became oddly fixed, as if he had not believed he would get this far in a script of his own invention. "Yes, well, I find myself in need of—that is, I'd be very much obliged if—I have come to surrender myself for—oh, *listen* . I want you to cut off my head."

Half the court gasped, half the court cheered, and Arum's mouth went dry. He stood with alacrity, pressing his palms against the reassuring solidity of the old oaken dining table. "Absolutely not."

Florian tugged at his elbow. "You can't say *no* !"

"I'm a knight, not a—a people-killer!"

“Arum. Darling. Pal. That’s not a person, that’s a monster surrendering himself.”

“Yes, but why—”

“Because he’s repented of his wickedness, clearly—”

Damien nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, perfect, I couldn’t have said it better myself! I have indeed reflected on my life of—of just the most euphoric and aesthetically pleasing sinning possible—and realized I cannot stop myself! I need to *be stopped* by a noble human with great abs and rose-petal lips, it’s the only solution to my rampage of wickedness!” He placed a hand on his forehead and shed a single tear, pathetic and preposterous. Arum tried to pretend it didn’t enhance his prettiness as well. He opened his mouth to protest again—the lord was play-acting, surely had something secreted up his sleeve—but the Queen made a chord of finality. Arum, she indicated, was to escort Damien to the northern courtyard, to arrange for his execution. The courtiers would follow shortly.

Arum swallowed his distaste, deferring to his duty, and joined Damien’s side. As far as Arum was concerned, the terrible task could be completed without delay. Let this illustrate how little he guessed the foliate lord’s thoughts. For Damien inveigled miniscule delays—he wished to make a final prayer, he needed to powder his nose, would Arum begrudge an old man (of no more than thirty years, Arum estimated) one last coffee?

Arum was astute enough to bespy this as blustering, be it born of anxiety or attention-seeking. But he bit his tongue, playing a supporting performer in Damien’s production. His curiosity was up, and even if it was not to be satisfied with a conclusion, the lord’s charade could be extended to prevent the recitation of an already wrung-out braggadocious anecdote. Or worse—without witty entertainment on this longest winter night, the courtiers might connive to engage our knight in the *other* sense of charades. Or break out the Monotony board. The Exquisite Corpse was fun, but oh, the horrors of *limericks* were to be avoided at all costs. Participating in procrastination was a small price.

That was what he would have insisted, were he interrogated, for it was not untrue. But the more toothsome truth was that he couldn’t summon the stomach to slay what was, very nearly, a person. Arum was an honorable young man, and I believe he would have felt the same foreboding had the fellow been foul, fetid, or flip; but I have

already described Damien, and Arum was far from insensate to his handsomeness, his honeyed scent, and sweeter manners. Every extending request was made with the greatest graciousness, and every thank-you came with an endearing turn of his mouth. Poor Arum was dismayed to find himself much undone.

They were, when this thunderbolt hit him, stood in the center of the Citadel's courtyard, jolly courtiers joining to see the green man's beheading. "Do you want anything else?" Arum asked, half-breathless.

"My good knight, you have already offered. I am quite content to proceed," Damien told him quietly.

"That's very reasonable!" Arum responded, far too loudly. "I'll take you to say goodbye to your reindeer, and then I'll deliver the axe!"

Damien gave him another of those frozen smiles, this time with real fright. "My what? I don't know any reindeer—oh but of course you saw her, haha, my *reindeer* , yes, well, she'll be quite alright, and so will I for that matter, why don't we carry on?"

Arum gave him a sideways look and insistently looped his arm through Damien's, pulling him through an archway and around a corner towards the stables. Damien pulled away from him outside the door, ducking his head within and calling out: "Goodbye, dear Rilla, my reindeer!" Arum pushed him inside, furtively panning his peepers to ensure their privacy.

"Listen, Damien, I'm not going to kill you, that's not the sort of person I am. You're going to punch me and then ride away on your reindeer, and I'll tell everyone you were a dirty underhanded monster and escaped. I don't know what's going on in your head, but I don't think you really want to die, and if you do, you should—I don't know, do monsters have therapists?"

"Oh, I'm not going to die."

"What?"

"I asked you to cut off my head, I never said anything about *killing* me."

" *What?* "

"Does deadheading a plant kill it?"

“I—no—I—was that a pun—damn you—stop making my head spin—where *is* your reindeer?” The stall she’d been stashed in held her tack and ornaments, but not a shadow, not a whisper of the beast herself.

Damien grabbed Arum’s shoulders. “Don’t think about my reindeer! Think about—about me, what I’m telling you! I…need you to chop off my head because I need seeds from my blood, and it’s the fastest way to get a large quantity. I’ll reattach the head later, it’s no matter.”

“Your blood has seeds in it?! Why journey all this way to find someone to cut it off?”

“I don’t suppose you’d believe me if I said I’d developed a mad courtly passion for you from tales of your adventures?”

Arum raised one eyebrow. Damien broadened his smile. Arum shook his head. Damien gave his eyelashes a sad, slow bat, visibly trying not to laugh. Arum blushed and cleared his throat.

“You’re trying to distract me. Why is your pulse racing, what is making you panic, honeysuckle? Did your reindeer…go somewhere?”

Damien sobered his face. “If I promise to tell you after you behead me, will you come back to the courtyard? She’s…special, like myself, and your bigoted knights would taste her blood as soon as mine.”

“Except for me.”

“Except for you, Sir Arum.”

Arum had never been an eager or easeful knight; he found it much too difficult to distance himself from the pain he dealt. He would have been happier as a tinkerer or librarian, or even a chef, but he supposed certain paths are sacrificed when you take your first breath as the son of the Queen. He had found fulfillment in nurturing his natural virtues, growing his observative mind and steady hands, his quick tongue, and his original spirit. Privately, he knew his mettle would never meet the might of most knights, for his boldness was stayed by his inglorious mercy. It was a lip-service virtue, but who cares for it when staring into the eyes of an enemy, or of a monstrous enigma?

“If you betray my trust, honeysuckle, I will find the soft parts of your body—”

“So forward!”

“—with my *knife* .”

“Sounds delightful, I mean frightful.” He held out a hand. “It is time, Arum.”

⁂

Damien knelt and gave Arum a wink before laying his vegetal neck on the block. Arum reached out and swept Damien’s hair to either side, so the lovely curls would not be shorn. He was comforted to find Damien’s leaf-like skin cool and waxy to the touch. If it had been warm, he would have worried the lord would bleed and die after all. Arum hefted the ax he had been brought, a big blade on a shaft half his own height. The crowd of courtiers thrilled for the kill. Arum’s pulse pounded in his ears, and his world narrowed to the scant inches of Damien’s bare neck, his body still and peaceable, and his bright promise that he would not die.

He swung the axe.

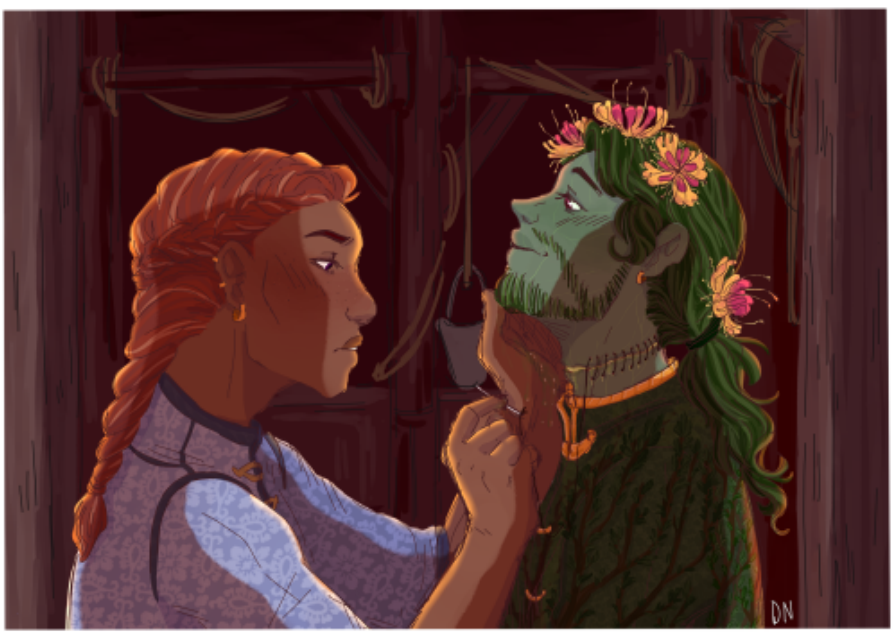
A single cut, clean and careful, powerful enough to cleave the spinal column. Damien’s head rolled across the cobbles, vessels leaking a sticky puddle of sap and seeds, like he had split the center of a poppy. The crowd cheered and jeered. The body was still and limp, slumped as though its strings had been severed. Arum wondered if there was any possible revenge to take on a man who tricked you into killing him. He lunged forward, frantically scooping Damien’s head into his arms, knee-walking to his truncated torso to test for a pulse. Before he could lay a hand to his heart, Damien’s limbs started as though shocked, and his palms pressed against the ground, pushing himself into a sitting position. Arum was dimly aware of someone fainting before the courtiers stampeded for the safety of the hall.

In the center of the chaos, he knelt by Damien’s headless form, blood-sap soaking into his trousers, mesmerized by the motion of Damien weaving his fingers together and stretching out his arms. The lord rolled his shoulders, and finally extended his hands to Arum. The knight, brain boggled, misread the gesture, meeting his hands with one of his own, tracing the odd branching veins of Damien’s left palm. Damien squeezed his hand briefly, making a coaxing gesture with his right, and the knight startled, relieved to realize they were at least alone, and sheepishly extended Damien’s head, which had been holding like bread or a baby in the crook of his arm. Damien accepted it, and held it aloft to meet Arum’s eyes, one eye winking. Arum gave a shaky, tinny laugh. Damien smiled sympathetically, and stretched

his arms back into Arum's space, bringing his head to Arum's face and planting a small, soft kiss on the knight's cheekbone.

Arum's cheeks flooded with blood, and he stammered an inarticulate nonresponse. Damien stood, drawing from his garments a small supple leather bag, which he gave Arum with a gesture at its button closure. Arum, grateful for somewhere else to turn his eyes, held the bag open while Damien clicked his fingers in five quick notes. His blood-seed separated from the mess of sap, swirling into the air like a swarm of starlings, and diving into the pouch. Arum very carefully and consciously kept his composure, not dropping it, but sliding the bone button home. He returned it to Damien, who disappeared it into the folds of his clothes before catching Arum's wrist and pulling him to his feet. The lord tugged gently, and Arum followed him to the stables without complaint.

The knight bolted the door behind them, and sought the shadows for a simple footstool, which he insistently pressed Damien to sit on. He then produced a needle and a length of golden silk from a locked cache of questing supplies. Damien lifted an eyebrow, and then his whole head, holding it steady while Arum sewed neck to neck with delicate stitches. There was, it seemed, nothing in the world save their silent surgery. You will all, I think, be glad this was not so; for now we cry--enter Rilla!



[Illustration by scintillart.]

Arum reasonably assumed the knock at the door came from a nosy courtier, and would not have opened it had Damien not tried to disrupt his handiwork by half-standing with the intent to do exactly that. The knocker was a lady he had never seen before, wrapped in a borrowed horse blanket and beaming with the air of a child who had stolen an apple without being caught. She did not look at all pleased to see Arum, but ducked her antlered head and let him close the door behind her when he bade her to enter. She bent over Damien, inspecting Arum's stitches and giving the lord's cheek a brief caress. "Leave it to you to get your head chopped off by the only knight friendly enough to sew it back on for you." Arum made a dubious hum in his throat--even his friends would not call him friendly. Damien made a distressing airy sound in reply, and the deer woman gave Arum a delegative nod. "Better finish up then, so he can have his throat back."

He resumed his work. "Are you the reindeer?"

She made a small sardonic curtsy with the edge of the horse blanket, unconsciously giving Arum a generous glimpse of her thigh at the edge of his gaze. Damien made a wheezy chuckle. Our knight nervously applied his needle.

"What's your name?" It would not have been seemly to sigh, so Arum suppressed the urge.

"I am Sir Arum, of the High Court. What is yours?"

"Secret."

"That's not how that works!"

"It is when only one of us is armed."

Arum cast his eyes skyward, or rather ceilingward, and let the matter lie. He'd already heard Damien call her Rilla, after all.

The deer sat down on a sealed barrel, rustling something in her hands that she hastily hid when Arum glanced in her direction. Like the lord had earlier, she batted her eyes at him, but it ill suited her direct and imperative nature. He laughed, but his eyes held a warning. "So it is a caper your decapitation facilitated. You know I cannot look the other

way."

Damien refuted that claim by gently turning Arum's face towards himself.

"Wait," the lady said. "Damien, we'd better let him look, before he does something stupid." She showed Arum a notebook, well-bound in red-dyed leather. "See, there's an amaryllis embossed into the cover. That's my name, it's my property. All I did was make some notes about the gardens here." She flipped to a drawing of a distinctive twisted oak tree.

"So I just take your word that you did nothing more?"

"Oh for--he's impossible. You're impossible!" She flicked the horse blanket to the floor. "Look! Where could I be hiding anything?" Arum was wildly embarrassed, but determined not to let it interfere. He would, it seemed, have to concede that she hid no stolen item, as he fought to keep his gaze from lingering overlong on any part of her. Her calves tapered to slender ankles, beneath which were pear-shaped hooves. Later, he would realize this allowed her to balance in a human fashion, but in the moment all he could think was whether she had freckles on her ass, and what a humiliating thought that was--she was too mature, and the wrong kind of deer, and he shouldn't have been thinking about her ass anyway…

Lord Damien clapped a hand over the open side of his throat to make a seal. "Rilla," he laughed, voice still airy and wrong, "the poor boy doesn't know where to look." He brushed the knuckles of his other hand over Arum's cheek. "You could fry an egg on your face, dear heart."

"I should finish stitching you up," Arum replied, clumsy-tongued. Rilla handed him his fallen needle.

When he was done, they each kissed one of his hands, and Damien poured him a handful of seeds. "Plant them now," he said, "and in the spring you'll have St. Damien's yarrow." Arum knew the plant; it was rare, and highly prized for its blood-staunching properties--but it was more effective than true yarrow, and boasted delicate blooms, from which he brewed tea. He had a giddy moment in which he nearly asked if Damien *was* the saint, but he preferred to continue believing that was an impossibility.

And then Rilla turned into a reindeer and Arum opened the gate for them, and only when Florian ran out of a doorway to embrace him,

swearing he'd feared Arum was dead, did he realize he had forgotten to make Damien punch him after all.

"My friend, you look feverish."

"I--er--well, what happened was--was…"

Florian scowled. "You've been glamoured, discombobulated. How dare he! Come, we'll go indoors and you can lie down with a restorative beverage and tell everyone you're too overcome to play games."

"Florian, I love you."

"I know."

⁂

The snows set in for the season with a brutal bent, the softness of the flakes offset by abundance, at its worst building to Arum's hips. The thaw, when it came, turned the snow to a tide, rushing down the hills and overwhelming the river. Dams broke, mud slid, villagers retreated to high ground. Arum criss-crossed the citadel, disrupting profiteers and lending his strength to repairs. When a horse could travel, he rode, but his own legs carried him as often as not. There were days and weeks when he felt destined to never be dry again.

As winter bled painfully into a late and much-sought spring, it became apparent that the lack of sunlight on the ground, and damage to crops, had badly hindered the food supply. The people ate fewer vegetables and more meat that season, and even Arum swallowed his squeamishness and helped butcher as needed. It stung his heart, but not his conscience; he had always hated killing for sport, but he was at peace with staving off hunger. He caught a persistent nightmare, for different reasons, when a miller who had opened her home to him laid out a fresh-slain deer. The buck's antlers were damp with rainwater, and the firelight reflected in the drops appeared golden and sparkling, and the miller spat a curse for a monster that had stolen her chickens--and so, for nights afterward, Arum dreamed of Rilla's throat slit and her eyes glassy, and he would rise and pace until the image faded.

Herbivorous animals, without Arum's choice to extend their diet, roamed further from their safe habitats, and predators followed them. Arum criss-crossed the citadel again, this time killing wolves and Tyrantlizards which had become a danger to human life. Once, when he came home, his mother took a long look at him, covered in rain

and animal blood and looking hollow in the eyes, and she held him tight, heedless of her gown. “I cannot stop thinking that they are only hungry,” he confessed, and she stroked his back. “I do not think I was meant to be a knight. I feel as though the entire world is wrong, and that I am in the wrong place, all the time,” he finished, and she sent him to bed with a cup of soup.

Spring stalled, and did not progress. The fresh shoots of green that were so badly needed did not appear. Arum’s flowerbed of blood-bounty yarrow did bloom; the early flowers were ruined by frost, but he was able to harvest and preserve a goodly number. Frustration at warm weather’s lateness turned to alarm; they had reached the summer solstice with no apparent change in season since the vernal equinox. The Queen sent pigeons to the borders of her lands, and to the most gifted astronomers, until she received a reply that left her singing an agitated aleatoric cadenza. The progression of the cosmos had not halted. If the stars were to be believed, they should indeed have been in early summer, yet her clever correspondents had timed the days and found no sign of the sunlight hours lengthening. Eventually, someone had thought to try some tests, and had written to say that they had found the air so full of magic that they had been forced to conclude that their weird weather was illusory or contrived. Further, Florian arrived with great fanfare, having brought home green peas and strawberries, and yellow roses, from a scouting mission to the south. There were borders to this, then.

Arum took out a map, and poured through the Queen’s letters, and drew a circle, and marked its center. His mother bit her lip and nearly forbade him to seek the source when he showed her. Florian flung his hands into the air when the plan was unfolded to him. “You’re going to the Swamp of Titan’s Blooms? You can’t be serious. You can’t be sane!” Then, more somberly: “You’ll never survive.”

“Nonsense,” Arum countered, with a brisk click of his tongue. “So long as I keep my wits about me, I could live there quite happily for some time.” He met his friend’s eyes. “Someone has to try it, and I fear a group would only increase the odds of attracting dangerous attention. I will not be stupid, I assure you.”

“If you die, I won’t speak to you for at *least* a week.”

⁂

Arum outfitted himself with considerable care. Despite his daring words, he sensed in his core that this quest would change him. He

dressed in durable clothing, soft and mobile fabrics with leather armor buckled on top, and judiciously supplemented with metal along his vital column: a gorget on his throat and a sleeveless mail shirt, carefully dulled to protect him from glittering inopportunely. He brought an assortment of daggers, and slung a pentagonal shield over his back, but eschewed his sword; and he packed clean socks, a blanket, fresh water, a small cooking pot, a wooden spoon, a little coin, a little food, canteens of fresh water, a small medical kit, the carefully-dried yield from his patch of St. Damien's yarrow, and almost nothing else.

Arum rode as far as the edge of the swamp, where he set the mare loose; she knew her own way homeward. He summoned his courage and crossed the invisible line into the swamp. It greeted his senses with subtle but certain differences, the air more humid, the smell earthier, greener, and softened by lillies. He rather liked it, and some of his apprehension eased. It was a good thing he had insisted on traveling alone, for he suspected any companions would have swiftly fallen into the water. His own feet found safe ground by inexplicable instinct.

Long he wandered, the unreliability of the terrain forcing him to take roundabout arcs in his progression towards his map-mark. It was tempting to do nothing but drink in the beauty of the swamp, as he swiftly lost his heart to each plant as he laid eyes on it. He took a rest eventually, unfolding the map across his knees and humming softly as he estimated his position. The song was one the Queen had taught her son, soothing him with it in his babyhood. Even as an adult, Arum realized the song inspired sleepiness as much as contentedness, but he intended to do nothing more than rest comfortably against the stalk of a comically large swamp pink, until he had his wind back. He leaned forward to refold the map, humming all the while, but when he tried to lean back against the stem, he fell flat on his back. He rolled over and squinted suspiciously at the pink. He made a great show of turning his back on it and rearranging the weight of his pack, before springing around. "Ha! Caught you on the move!" There was a brief silence.

"No you didn't," said the flower. Arum strode to its side and stood on his toes. Very gently, he pushed apart segments of the flower's tufty head to reveal a large, cow-like nose. A massive hand emerged from the stalk, parting it like the opening of a cloak. (Arum's mind helpfully informed him that this made no physical sense, as it felt perfectly solid and fibrous moments before.) It closed around Arum's wrist, as another hand pushed aside flower tufts to fix a giant brown eye on the

knight. “I say!” said the flower, “if you’d be kind enough to stop messing up my camoflauge, we can both carry on with our days and give each other no trouble! I know you are a human, and I am a monster, and that may seem quite an absurd proposition, but you seem like a nice enough lad, so you can just enjoy your nature walk and I can go home and tell my greatest friends that you’re probably not dangerous!”

Arum, as you already know, was an honorable man. This does not mean he was a good listener, and this flaw was understandably amplified by being faced with a monster who could have snapped him in two. The knight jammed his knee in the general vicinity he thought the monster might have testicles and danced backwards, drawing his daggers and scowling defensively while the creature swore. “On your mark, beast,” Arum snarled.

The big pink heaved a resigned sigh and pulled at itself, becoming a probably-magic hat and cloak draped over the arm of a minotaur. He carefully folded them into a cloth shoulder bag and smiled his big teeth at Arum, putting his palms out calmingly. “I’m sure you don’t want to use those, my lad!” Arum curled his lip back. He wasn’t a 14-year-old waving a boning knife around in a panic. “See,” the minotaur continued, “you’re going to put them down, and I will leave my weapons sheathed, and we can shake hands like gentlemen and I’ll give you some hot chocolate from my flask!”

“Poisoned, no doubt. I am no sugar-starved boy, and you cannot tempt me. Fight me fairly, coward!” The minotaur lifted one hand to toss a fistful of lapis powder in the air, and Arum, alarmed, leapt at him. This was a foolish move. The minotaur had called himself a portal, and they both fell through. The minotaur landed on his back, and Arum crashed against him, the minotaur swiftly seizing Arum around the ribcage and flinging him off and away. Arum rolled clumsily, holding his blades away from his own body.

The minotaur rose to his feet and drew a sword. They were on a branch, or fallen tree--mossy and wide enough for a cart to pass--over a deep patch of brackish water. “Please be very calm and watch your footing, young man!” The knight considered this a disingenuous instruction from someone who’d just flung him like a sack of flour. He pulled himself up and surveyed the situation. If he ran downhill, he would have to fight the minotaur, who seemed increasingly more trouble than he was worth. With a roll of his eyes and a stretch of his thighs, Arum pelted up the sloped wood and found handholds in a tangle of briars blocking his path. Some longer thorns pierced his

gloves, but he managed well enough. “Well, *shit* ,” the minotaur said, and made a peculiar noise. Arum glanced back to see a wooden whistle between his lips. He made a strange succession of notes, and something like a giant sundew tendril seized Arum by the waist and curled in on itself, dangling him indecisively in the air. He made an undignified holler.

The minotaur, below, may have been yet more alarmed. “That--that’s not what I was trying to do!” He blew on the whistle again, causing the sundew to loosen its grip, enough for Arum to yell at the minotaur to stop. The beast looked flustered, and Arum would have been sympathetic if he wasn’t so frightened. “Help! Is anyone around? I can’t work my whistle right and--oh no!” The sundew, as if spooked, lurched erratically, trying to retract, but dangling Arum over the long drop to the water. He shut his eyes and braced himself for the fall.

“Take a deep breath and hold it!” called a new voice from below. Arum did so, but when the newcomer blew his own whistle in a smooth tune, sending Arum plummeting to the swampwater, the knight lost his breath in a scream. He inhaled again too late, choking on water and weighed by his garb, his left leg shocked first by the water and again by the muddy bottom. Someone took his hands and helped him surface. He came up alongside a horse, so he put his arms around its neck while he coughed up water, an unknown hand thumping his back encouragingly. “Do you think you can ride Dampierre, Skin? If you just want to drape yourself over his back, it’ll be enough to get you up top.”

Arum flicked a lilly pad off his head. “I think I broke my leg.”

“Can’t relate! C’mon, all you have to do is swing over, Dampierre and I will do the rest.” Then, more solemnly, “I can’t promise you’ll be on our good side, but we aren’t going to let you suffer.” Arum, still blinking to clear his streaming eyes, did his best. “There you go,” his rescuer soothed. “Now scoot back and I’ll steer. Hold onto my waist if you think you need to.” There was a second in which Arum thought the man was wearing mail and sitting sidesaddle.

“You’re a mermaid. Er, merman?”

He chuckled. “Merman sounds like I’m scared of cooties. I have a fish tail, I’m a mermaid.”

Dampierre surged forward. “This isn’t precisely a horse, is it?”

“Kelpie.”

Arum kept his seat and held his tongue as the kelpie took them from water to soft earth to the bridge. It was a fallen tree, he could now see clearly. When they came alongside the minotaur, Arum realized the beast was fighting tears. “I’m so glad you were here, Marc! I should never have called on the Keep to intervene, we have established well enough that it is beyond our control.”

Marc gave the minotaur a friendly pat on his head, between the horns. “The Keep can’t control itself, either. Let’s get Skin to the infirmary, it’ll be alright.” The minotaur, still subdued, jogged alongside Dampierre. The briars Arum had climbed pulled themselves apart like gates opening, slow and hesitant like old ironwork. The Keep beyond stole his breath and broke his brain: a composite of plants, something living and changeable and incomparable; the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Doors of petals opened for them, and he tried to fill his mind with the sight of the building, even as the pain in his leg made him long for unconsciousness.

The minotaur helped him down from the kelpie’s back and onto a cushioned settle. Marc disappeared, still riding the kelpie, deeper into the Keep. The minotaur hovered anxiously. Arum shut his eyes. He came back to himself with a start when a hand touched his forehead. “It’s alright, you’re safe. I’m going to examine your leg, Sir Arum.”

“ *Rilla* ?”

She smiled at him. “You picked that up from Damien. It’ll do. How intense is your pain level right now?”

“Will you be very annoyed with me if I say ‘bad’?”

And so he got to see her laugh. “Which sounds worse: taking off your leggings, or letting me cut them off?” If he had not left his gear behind, he would have agreed to cut them, but as it was, he gritted his teeth and hauled them off, with her help. She elevated the injured leg, donned a pair of strange spectacles, and said “hmm.” Arum watched her face and hands and tried to answer her questions accurately. Her focus and sureness were more appealing than he liked to admit. “Alright,” Rilla said at last, “your leg isn’t broken. It will bruise horribly, and you need to be very gentle with your hip, knee, and ankle. In a few days, I should be able to tell you whether we need to treat you for ligament hyperextension or anything like that.”

“A few *days* ? You want me to stay here!?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Marc said you could barely ride

Dampierre, and Angelo said you didn't have a horse of your own. I'm going to have to put you on a crutch as it is--you can't go anywhere like this!"

"I--it just--it seems most inappropriate that I accept your hospitality."

Rilla had just finished washing her hands in a basin, and turned to shrug at him, still drying her hands. "Last week, Angelo came up behind me in the garden, and I didn't hear him, and when I turned around I threw a crocus bulb at his head. He forgave me; he's already forgiven you." Arum gathered that Angelo was the minotaur's name. His hesitation was more related to "staying in a den of monsters instead of furthering his quest to restore the passage of seasons" than to "accepting hospitality from a household containing a person he had tried to stab despite, he was now pretty sure, being given clear notice that he was in no danger." He did not think it would be politic to admit this to Rilla, whom he gave a weak smile.

⁂

The deer healer let him sleep the rest of the afternoon away, the pain numbed with medicinal syrup. He dreamed pleasantly of plaiting a pile of wildflowers into a crown, twisting trios of stems together with patient hands until they locked together securely. Nothing like the danger-edged haziness he associated with a healer's drugs. When next he woke, the figure seated by his side was not the lady but the lord, as green and comely as at their last meeting. "Lord Damien," Arum said softly, and Damien set his book aside.

"How are you feeling, friend knight?"

"A little like a Tyrantlizard stepped on me."

"Lady Amaryllis," Damien replied, with a subtext Arum couldn't identify, "gave me permission to give you more painkiller, if you want it."

Arum stretched his limbs tentatively. "Not as much as I want food, I think."

"Fair enough. The household will gather shortly, should you feel up to joining us."

"I wish to try moving about, yes."

Damien gave him an encouraging smile. "Alright. Sit upright for a

minute and I'll help you when you're ready."

Arum sat up, but fixed Damien with a serious face. "Whom should I address about the terms of my stay here?"

Damien tilted his head. "Let us assume I am more or less authoritative, as a lord who lives in this Keep. But I'm afraid I do not catch your meaning."

"I cannot accept medical care and eat your food without offering something in return."

"But of course you can! Or does the humans' unwritten law of hospitality differ so greatly from that of monsters?" Damien was teasing, mostly.

Arum twisted his lips ruefully in response. "I wouldn't know. Which is part of the problem." Damien's brow furrowed. "My lord," Arum continued, "I did not come to the swamp idly, and I cannot accept your hospitality without being certain I am not an enemy to the household."

Damien gave him a strange look. "How singular that a knight should even deem it up for consideration. But then, Rilla and I learned that part of your nature at the winter solstice."

" *What* part of my nature?" Arum snapped back.

Damien badly smothered a laugh. "Mercifulness, dearest. Did you expect me to call you a secret monster-lover?"

"I should call that hypocritical of you, given that you are the fourth monster today to decline playing my opposite number."

Damien made a small sound of amusement in his throat. "Well, I wouldn't give up hope quite yet." Arum blushed scarlet, rethinking his choice of words and distrusting himself to reply. "Come, knight," Damien said gently. "I'll help you stand."

Arum had a crutch, but appreciated that the lord encouraged him to lean against Damien, letting him support some of Arum's weight. It helped, even if it brought their cheeks dangerously close. "Now," Damien said thoughtfully, "in answer to your concerns, I suspect I can lay them to rest if you tell me what *did* bring you to Titan's Blooms."

"You would not believe me if I told you."

Damien opened his mouth, poised to protest, and thought better of it. “Fair enough. I thought the same when Amaryllis and I came to *your* home on a hunch.” Arum chuckled drily. “Why don’t we make a deal, as we did then? A trade. You will receive everything you need to recover, and in exchange--”

“I have nothing to give you, Lord Damien.”

“In exchange,” Damien said firmly, “you will repay any extraneous gifts in kind.”

“What on earth do you imagine that to entail, honeysuckle?” It was embarrassing how unsarcastic the nickname sounded.

“Say one of us tells you a story--you will tell *us* a story, or you’ll sing a song, or play a second round of dominoes. Things will come up.”

“I don’t think you’re getting a valuable end of this deal.”

“It is valuable, sir knight, to offer company and break up the routine of days. We will sustain your body, and you shall sustain our spirits. Fair’s fair.”

“And I suppose you’ll keep a tidy accounting column of how convivial I have been?”

It was a joke, but Damien took it seriously. “Speak to me in the evenings. I’ll make sure your account has been settled and your honor satisfied.”

Chapter End Notes

Q: "What's a fitt?"
A: Gosh, I don't remember, it's an Arthurian thing.

Fitt II

When they entered the hall, Rilla was pouring a bucket of water over Marc's head. He shook his hair out of his face and tied it into a topknot with a piece of twine. Angelo, standing well out of the splash zone, gave Damien and Arum a small wave and pulled out a chair for Arum to land in. He took a moment to store the crutch, before drawing up his posture and meeting the minotaur's eyes. "I believe I owe you an apology."

"My goodness me! Whatever for?"

It was a little hard to take him seriously, when he sounded like an enthusiastic blacksmith performing in a pantomime. He and the poet Damien made a pair--a charming or challenging pair, he had yet to decide. Arum cleared his throat to keep his expression sincere. "Were you trying to tell me you meant me no harm, right before I attacked you?"

"Ah! I most certainly was."

"I can only apologize, then. It was…" He had been about to say "against my oaths as a knight," but this was not true. He was sworn not to attack an inoffensive *human* . "It was unfair and improper, and I failed to conduct myself...in proportion to the situation in front of me." Arum felt a wave of exasperation and self-disdain. He was a proud man, and could be vain, and he did not berate himself for this; he liked the person he was, and usually made choices he was comfortable owning up to. But this--this *knee-jerk* fear and distrust, he could not account for. He looked into himself and found he intensely disliked it as well. Knightly oaths were no substitute for morals. He could remember no reason he had arrived at this state of mind. With a flash of horror, he realized he could not even remember having sworn his oaths, or the process of deciding to take up the role of a knight. He knew the contents of his duty, but not the words; knew what was expected, but not his justifications, nor even his desires. It was as though he had memorized a list of mountains he had never seen: he was the son of the queen, therefore he was a knight. Human knights were sworn to slay monsters, therefore he was as well. How dare he. *How dare he* have needed to see something human in the Green Knight's eyes to question himself and his life?

What was wrong with *him* ?

“Hey, Arum, are you okay?” Marc interrupted, across the table. He leaned his elbows on the table, making small puddles with his soaking-wet sweater.

Arum smirked slightly despite himself. “Aside from the leg, you mean?”

Marc scoffed back, eyes twinkling. “I forgot you even had legs. I mean, *legs* ? What are those about, amiright?”

“You did seem very far away,” Rilla prodded softly. She had seated herself at the head of the table, a full wineglass in her hand. Damien and Angelo were laughing together in an adjoining butler’s pantry, gathering dishes. Arum wondered whether Damien had been trying to clue him in that Lady Amaryllis was truly in charge.

“I was thinking about my mother,” he fractionally admitted, to his own surprise. Rilla gave him a sympathetic look and poured him a glass of wine. It wasn’t wine in the usual sense--it smelled like berries. Damien and Angelo set the table, leaving an empty spot next to Arum.

“For our brother,” Marc explained.

Arum opened his mouth, hesitated, and tried again. “I know I’m being very dense, but I hadn’t actually grasped that some of you are siblings.”

The table laughed. “The two of us,” Rilla explained, gesturing to the air between herself and Marc. “And Talfryn.”

They looked nothing alike, even if Arum laid aside the question of how different a reindeer was from a koi. “Don’t think about it too hard, Skin.”

Lord Damien and Marc had cooked in collaboration: a clear egg soup brightened with ramps, gnocchi with sheep’s cheese and mushrooms, and apple-studded bread pudding, tinted pink from the fruit’s scarlet peel. Arum did not whimper in delight, but it was a near thing.

The leaf-doors parted for a tall, well-built faun in a smart periwinkle jacket, holding an umbrella and a leather pack. He folded the umbrella neatly, one-handed, and set it by the door. “Evening,” he said, and a smaller, lighter voice called: “Good *eve* ning, sweethearts! Oh, boo, is it just pwetty Willa and a bunch of burly boys tonight? Aren’t you all just *thrilled* I’m here to dazzle up your day? Pour out some of that strawberry wine, cuties, cuz it sure is shaping up to be

our only chance of tasting summer for a long, long time!" The speaker, Arum realized as they approached, was a field mouse perched on the faun's shoulder. He courteously set out his hand for her to climb onto, and lowered her to the table between Amaryllis's plate and Angelo's. He gave the lady a squeeze around her shoulders. He looked rather like Marc, so Arum assumed he was Talfryn.

The mouse, who wore a crown of lily-of-the-valley, stretched her tiny paws in a grandiose gesture of gratitude as Angelo placed a teaspoon of wine in front of her. "Angelo, you're just my *favoritest* cow...man...thing…"

"Minotaur?"

"Yes, that. I've always said you're the *nicest* whatever-you-just-said I know!"

"Have you indeed, Miss Quanyii?" The mouse made a vague hum in response, before flopping onto her stomach and lapping at the wine. Arum realized he was staring, and tore his eyes away. Talfryn and Rilla were whispering to each other, Talfryn gesturing at the leather pack--which, this close, was wonderfully familiar.

"My gear!" Arum cried, glad for all it represented--his own things, his own tea, clean clothes!

Talfryn opened his mouth, smiling kindly, but Quanyii reared up onto her hind paws and screeched. She daintily laid one forepaw over her forehead (carefully avoiding her flower crown) and pointed at Arum with the other, eyes huge. "How ghastly! How wicked! I might faint! A human! A nasty, beastly, smelly, deceitful, inconstant, narrow, clumsy, stupid, cruel, *boring* human! Oh! I never dreamed I'd see the day! In the Green Keep! A bastion of righteous monstrousness! A human! And not *just* a human! A *knight* ! Ooooh, Angelo, hit him with your big, strong fist before he slits all our delicate, beautiful throats--but especially mine!"

The seated monsters collectively sighed. "Quanyii!" Damien rebuked, voice calm, "Sir Arum is our guest. Be civil, or be silent."

The mouse gave Arum a long, calculating look. " *Arum* , huh?" She folded her little arms. Arum bit the inside of his cheek. "Well, I certainly can't say I expected how *you* would look."

"What do you mean?"

“Half as cool and twice as baby, but at least you’ve got your ‘violet eyes’ and your ‘raspy voice.’ How infuriating! If you had to turn up, you could’ve at least left me with the security that you weren’t going to get drawn into a cross-species sexcapade *again.* ”

“...I have literally never done that! Additionally, we have never met. Also--”

“Shut up, I’m bored!” She balled her paws into tiny fists and looked around the table. “You people are no fun! You--you--you’re so *mutually supportive* it disgusts me! I’m going home to dine with my beautiful bitchy wife!” And she disappeared in a glittery fuchsia puff of smoke.

Arum stared at the empty space where she had stood, before lifting his gaze, a question on his lips. “Yes,” Talfryn laughed, seeing his expression, “she’s always like that. And no, we never know what she’s talking about--and no, you probably won’t like it when you find out.” He took the empty seat laid out for him, speared a mushroom with his fork, and continued: “She made me carry your gear for her, after she stole it.”

“I...was careless with it.”

Talfryn snorted. “No, I mean she literally told me she’d stolen it. She wasn’t sure who from, just that she had no intention of letting the owner come back to claim it.”

Marc gave him a fond, exasperated look. “And you *helped* her?”

“You know what she’s like!” Talfryn spread out his hands. “Besides, she said she’d give my sketchbook back if I did.”

“...And how did she get ahold of your sketchbook, Tal?”

“Illusion of a rare insect, a pink praying mantis. I got excited.”

“Ahhh,” Angelo sighed, nodding his big, shaggy head, and narrowly missing his neighbors with his horns. “Only last week, she caught me out with one of her wily illusions! I feel for you very much, Talfryn.”

“Did it involve a maiden in a pure white feather cloak picking ‘strawberries’ that turned out to be purging buckthorn?” Marc offered, sounding more nostalgic than aggrieved.

“No.”

“Maiden with prismatic hair and a giant rabbit?”

“No.”

“Maiden with a war mace made of an active wasps’ nest and a really cool slashed leather jacket she wouldn’t say where she bought?”

“No.”

“Beefcake wearing a fringed mask who saved you from hypothermia, but then you couldn’t find his one-room house again, even though you left a trail?”

“Marc, my friend, I feel I am learning a great deal about you this evening!”

“Is that a ‘no’?”

“Yes.”

“Damn it!”

Rilla’s eyebrows were high on her face. “Marc, are you saying Quanyii created all that?”

“Oh! No I am not, I’m saying those are all experiences I have had--*have had people tell me about* --and since Angelo can’t corroborate them, I’m leaving them in the ‘inconclusive’ column.”

Rilla broke into laughter, while Tal cried out, in the tone of a man deprived of water: “But what *did* you see, Angelo?”

“Ahhhh, my friends! I saw a shiny rock.”

[Illustration by taylor-draws-stuff.]

Damien's shoulders shook. "I--of course I understand how compelling that must have been--I promise I'm not laughing at *you* --oh, saints above!" Even Arum was caught up in the gathering's laughter, but Angelo laughed the loudest, throwing his head back. Marc leaned on the table, guffawing, while his brother half-smothered his laughter behind one hand. Rilla and Damien laughed musically and whole-

heartedly, eyes sparkling at each other. Arum felt a small pang in his chest; it did not feel like envy, but like cresting the last hill that brings your house into view. The pair's eyes flicked to Arum's face, and he suddenly could not breathe, could not think. He couldn't look back, or he'd drown, pleasantly but prematurely.

He fixed his eyes on the ceiling instead, where there hung a flower like a vast bioluminescent tiger lily. It gave off too dim a light for the size of the room, casting deep shadows into the corners, and drooped as though it had been watered too little. "Is the Keep sick?" Arum blurted out, and the resulting silence was so sad and still that he dragged his gaze back to his tablemates.

"We don't know," Rilla said carefully. She visibly abandoned her caution and proceded to profess, "I don't think it's ill, I think it's lonely. There's a hollowness to it. I think there's supposed to be something or someone here that it can't function without, or doesn't care to."

"Or cannot bear to," Arum suggested softly. "Have you any thoughts as to what it misses so?" He glanced at their faces, noting their quiet, unantagonistic resolve not to answer. "I take it I am intruding," he finally conceded stiffly. He felt like he'd lost a limb. "I beg your pardon," he forced out.

"Sir Arum." Damien reached across the corner of the table to lightly touch his hand. "We think your people stole it."

"Humans?"

"The Queen's court."

"Why on earth?"

"I am not one of the scientists at the table. Amaryllis and Marc made a device--I only ever sort-of understood what it did…"

Arum shook his head. "Never mind. If you have any clues, tell me, and I will bring it home to you."

"Excuse me?"

"This place is beautiful. It deserves to thrive."

"Is that so?" Damien mused, his voice warm and pleased and far too intimate for company. There was no sexual charge; it was simply the

sort of exposed, quiet voice best suited to conversation under a quilt.

“Arum, you’re rather wonderful yourself.” Rilla agreed. Damien’s light touch on Arum’s hand became a slow, pointed squeeze. “But you look exhausted. Bed for you, and we will talk about mysteries and unexplained phenomena and quests in the morning.”

Arum glanced to his right. “Lord Damien? The matter of accounting--”

“Shh. Love-all, tonight.”

⁂

Rilla handed Arum an object resembling a punched-tin terrarium, with an elegant orchid inside, its petals the blue of a robin’s egg. “It’s one of the Keep’s sensory flowers,” explained the lady, and Arum was surprised how readily he accepted this. “In theory, it would have reacted to the Keep’s missing component, if I had found it in your castle.”

“The Citadel,” Arum corrected. “It’s not mine.”

“If you say so!” she shot back, cheerful and insincere. “Anyway, if it’s there, I didn’t find it. Of course, I was avoiding people as much as possible, so…” She shrugged. “Maybe you will succeed.”

“And Damien’s blood-seed? I understand you needed St. Damien’s yarrow for something, but why bother, er, *obtaining* it at the Citadel?”

“Oh, we figured a distraction would give me a better shot. And besides, we were all pretty squeamish about, you know, making his blood flow.”

Arum frowned, turning his face into the sunlight streaming into the courtyard. “Decapitating him gave me nightmares,” he admitted, mouth running without the permission of his mind.

“I’m sorry. I know for a fact *I* could not have done it, and my supply--well, never mind, but I needed it for a medicine Marc takes, and I was desperate. But I did try. Not decapitating him, we were just going to try a finger to test the theory, and I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Damien ended up doing it himself, and even after we’d all seen that it didn’t hurt, and healed up beautifully--I couldn’t bear to help him do it again. Angelo cried just thinking about it, and Marc gave this irritating speech about not *really* needing to not be in pain all the time, and Talfryn...Tal is too gentle. Even if you weren’t, oh, the way

you are, I expect it would've been horrible. Seeing him stand again, if not the act itself. But it was worse for us, you understand, because we love him."

"And I don't?" Arum shot back. Blinked, baffled. "And I don't, of course, love him," he corrected, Amaryllis's gaze on his face intense. "So the scheme was clever, if macabre. And your, er, device--with the sensory flower--I didn't see it then. How did you hide it from me, when I asked what you'd been up to?"

Rilla smirked. "Oh, I was just careful about your line of sight."

"By careful application of nudity," Arum drawled drily, smirking back.

"Worked, didn't it?" Rilla reclined on the picnic blanket. "Come on. I told you ours, tell me yours."

Arum declined to lay beside her, holding his injured leg still and shredding a blade of grass. "Oh, I was sent on a quest."

"Informative."

"It is interminably dull. Political. Blah blah blah Arum, why don't you go to the swamp and bring me a phoenix feather, blah blah blah."

"...There's no way you'd find a phoenix in a swamp."

"So I responded, but they were very insistent. Did you not hear your murine acquaintance? Humans are not terribly bright."

It was a bad lie, and he knew it, but Amaryllis simply laughed at him. "You'll have to tell me sooner or later," she asserted, nose crinkled with the effort of trying not to smile.

Arum leaned over her face. "And why is that, hmm?"

She yawned in his face, like a cat. "You're going to get bored of not being able to brainstorm about it."

Arum let the silence stretch so long that Rilla tentatively opened one eye. "You are right," he conceded, "and I hate that you are." She laughed at him again. "And what's more, I am going to get bored of not talking to you about it, in particular, and that's annoying, too."

"Am I so terrible?" she teased.

“I dislike…the feeling that no person could be a satisfactory substitute. Sometimes I look at my best friend, or my mother, and nearly scream, because they are irreplaceable, which means that, once lost, the person I am *with* them would likewise be lost forever.” He paused. “Please tell me I didn’t say all that out loud.”

“Goodness,” Rilla said. “If there were any justice in the world, I’d be saying something very wise and sympathetic, and you’d feel better about having just been vulnerable about feeling vulnerability, and then you’d kiss me.”

So Arum, his face still hanging over hers, leaned in and caught her lips with his own. “Oh,” she said softly, shaping the word around his mouth before sliding her tongue in and curling her hands around his neck. She brushed her fingers through the hair at the back of his neck, as though fascinated by the texture. Their breathing synchronized, and Arum’s uncharacteristic anxiety faded from the corners of his mind.

It returned, as anxiety does.

“We probably shouldn’t have done that,” Arum whispered, lips still brushing against Rilla’s.

“Why not?”

“I was under the impression that you and Damien are…?”

“…Married?”

“You’re *married* ?”

“Pretty sure.” She squinted up at him, moved her hands to caress the sides of his face. “You look like a startled deer.” She paused. “And you didn’t laugh at that, so you’re serious--I don’t get it, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to come between you.”

“You wouldn’t be. Arum, do you really not…” She bit her lip. “I don’t want to give you a shock, not when you’re already injured.”

Arum snorted and pulled away from her, smiling ruefully. “I’m not as boring as all that, am I?”

“Oh dear, I really *don’t* think you’ve got it.”

Arum yawned loudly. “Mind if I nap while you decide whether I’m a big enough boy to hear it?”

“Well, at least grumpy Arum is an improvement over anxious Arum. Anxiety is Damien’s domain, I wouldn’t know what to do if you switched on me.”

⁂

“Well, Sir Arum, shall we discuss your account for the day?” The night had turned cold, and the pair sat by a stone firepit, embroidered cushions beneath them. The corners of Damien’s eyes crinkled pleasantly. Arum had tried to give Rilla the impression that he understood what she was trying to insinuate about their relationship, but he actually had a running list of four or five possibilities. The confound, as he saw it, was that he couldn’t imagine it was a loveless marriage. Or, he supposed, “love” was too hazily defined. They were, the both of them, too beautiful and brilliant and lovely in their hearts to not warrant adoration and, and, and *devotion.* Certainly if *he* was married to Rilla, he’d hope nobody could come between them (unless, a voice in the back of his head whispered, perhaps Damien could). Likewise, he could not imagine having eyes for anyone except Damien, had they shared a commitment (except, he supposed, he would for Rilla). So, let the supposition that they felt the same way about each other stand as true. That would mean...well, that would mean Rilla was implying theirs was not a restricted devotion. And if *that* was true, then, well, what did Arum want to do about it?

(The answer was kiss Damien.)

On the *other* hand, suppose he was projecting. Suppose there was something more complicated, or more painful, at play. And if *that* was true, then what was the honorable course of action? What if Damien held the kiss (kisses) against Rilla? Worse, what if he hurt her? (No, his stomach said, Damien would *never* .) It was important, Arum told himself sternly, to remember that he didn’t truly know either of them.

(The answer was do not kiss Damien. But he was allowed to *imagine* it.)

Still, there was the matter of his honor to consider. He’d made an agreement. He owed Damien like repayment for gifts that went beyond the bounds of hospitality. He was the only one who would know--unless Rilla said something. Perhaps what she really meant was that it was a test. Or that she was matchmaking Arum and Damien. Or there was magic at work. And anyway, his conscience made a difference.

(The answer was kiss Damien.)

But surely protecting Rilla, even if it wasn't necessary, was more important.

(The answer was do not kiss Damien.)

Damien brushed a loose piece of Arum's hair out of his face. "Does your leg hurt very badly?"

"It does. I apologize." Damien made a refutational hum. "I'm trying to think of the day's events, and my brain is not being very cooperative."

Damien dimpled. "Usually my brain decides to be mean to me by ensuring I *cannot stop* replaying the day. Or the week. Or something I did seven years ago."

(Would it hurt so very much if he kissed Damien?)

"I don't envy you."

Damien chuckled, the honeysuckle in his hair bouncing, along with his curls. "No." He squeezed Arum's knee briefly. "I know Angelo played cards or something with you in the morning."

Arum grinned. "I think we played cards in between talking about geology."

"Oh no, you've gone and encouraged him!" But it was plain Damien was pleased. "And didn't Rilla drag you outside in the afternoon?"

"She explained about the sensory flower."

"...The thing she and Marc put together?"

Arum sighed heavily. "Yes, 'the thing.'"

"I can't believe I allowed a knight into the bosom of my happy family, and he turned out to be another scientist."

"How dreadful for you."

"I might have to take up theoretical physics, so I can fit in."

"I prefer you as a poet."

(He *could* kiss Damien.)

Damien beamed. “I think Rilla would agree. Maybe you should stick around and back her up.”

(The answer was kiss Damien and lie about it.)

“There is one other thing someone gave me. But you must promise not to ask questions.”

“Bargains within bargains. Say on, Sir Arum.” Arum brought his face in close, and Damien closed the distance, bumping their noses together and squeaking delightedly when Arum kissed him. He was a more passive kisser than Rilla, following Arum’s mouth and gripping his shoulders. When Arum broke the kiss, Damien kept his eyes closed, savoring. “Well,” he said at last, “that was rather lovely. Who gave you that?”

“You promised not to ask.”

“So I did.” Damien gave him an additional, small kiss on the temple. “Return to sender.” He caught Arum’s hand and kissed that as well. “That one’s for you alone, no charge.” Arum felt warm all over.

⁂

“Arum,” Damien said the next day, voice slow and thoughtful. Rilla had ordered Arum to exercise his leg, gingerly. Damien was keeping him company while he did, and had encouraged Arum to take a short break. “May I ask you a personal question?”

“I’m going to regret saying yes, but you will notice that is not stopping me.”

“What is your earliest memory?”

“...You were so hesitant, I expected something *really* personal, like my favorite color.” Damien touched a hand to his throat in mock scandal. “Well. Let me think.” Arum considered his childhood. “I...was born at a very early age?”

Damien propped his chin on his hand, eyes dancing. “Is that common among humans?”

“More common than being born when elderly.”

“Fascinating.”

“And I...suppose I had a normal enough childhood. And then I became

a knight. And then I met you and Rilla. Why do you ask?"

"I suppose I'm curious about how humans live. Tell me a story, Sir Arum?"

"Gladly. Well. I. There was the time… I suppose my childhood wasn't very eventful. When I was in my teens...but I don't have any good stories from that time, either. Oh! I have one." He gave Damien a stumbling account of foraging with Florian for festival greenery on the morning of the solstice. He could not tell a story like Damien could, but he tried his best to name the things that had made his heart stir. Something in the softness of the snow, and the crunch beneath feet. In the owl they saw, headed to its bed in the early morning light. In the silly ditty Florian had sung under his breath. In returning to the warm, travois laden with their haul.

Damien watched his face and hands intently, which meant Arum kept catching himself gesticulating bigger, widening his eyes, making Damien look longer. They had slid together on the bench, thighs and shoulders touching. Arum had stopped speaking, but he could not remember when. He was staring at the delicate veins in Damien's leafy face, and breathing in honeysuckle. "Arum, I must speak my heart."

"Yes, you may," Arum responded, closing his eyes and parting his lips.

"Oh! That isn't what I meant, I'm afraid." Damien ran his green thumb over Arum's lower lip and waited until the knight's eyes fluttered open again. "I--I don't want to frighten you, but can you remember nothing before the solstice? I don't mean things you know *must* have happened, but things you *remember* happening? Shh, think hard."

"Was Lady Amaryllis trying to tell me I hit my head? I...I suppose I remember a few things. Not worthy of spinning a tale around, but...perhaps a week or two before the solstice." He frowned. "Is that it, then? I have memory loss?"

"Arum, my dear, we all do."

" *Everyone* ?"

"I cannot remember any earlier than you, and neither can Rilla, Angelo, Talfryn, or Marc." Arum turned this over in his mind, but as his brain buzzed, Damien continued: "After we met you, Rilla decided our best shot at determining what the Keep misses so was to establish a timeline. We found we could not. We...all of us had been assuming

we were the only one who was struggling, so we fell into easy rhythms and discussed nothing. And yet I know that Rilla has my heart, and Angelo my friendship, and it was obvious that Marc and Talfryn are Rilla's brothers, whether in blood or not." He ran his thumb along Arum's lip again. "And I know that we knew each other, in the beforetimes, though I cannot explain this. Tell me you feel it too."

"I feel your wishful thinking, honeysuckle." (And his heartbeat.) "We need to talk to Amaryllis."

⁂

Lady Amaryllis kept a workroom in the Keep, a chamber of carefully-organized materials and organic samples, jars and drawers labelled in tidy script, a striped mattress on a low bedframe suggesting a habit of overwork. "Damien!" cried the lady herself. "I thought we agreed! Heal him first, freak him out later!"

"My love, it came up naturally in conversation," Damien demurred, fingers crossed behind his back, where Arum could see them.

Rilla peered at Arum's pupils and felt his forehead. "And...you're doing okay, then?"

He grunted. "Amaryllis, I cannot overemphasize how much less distressing it is to know there's some bullshit magic going on than it was to think there was something wrong with *me* ." He paused. "Of course, there are a lot of things wrong with me, but not that one."

Rilla braced her hands on her lower back. "Alright. Alright, good."

Arum fidgeted. "Do you think it is connected to the seasons not changing?"

"The what?"

" *Rilla* . Are you serious?"

"...Are *you* ?"

Arum swiveled to look at Damien. "Wait, is that why it's been so cold lately?"

"The two of you live *in* nature! How did you not notice? The Citadel had a horrible winter, and the spring vegetables are simply not coming." He dragged a hand over his face. "The yarrow seeds you

gave me grew and bloomed, which was a boon, but we have been struggling with the food supply. We've been struggling, in general."

"Honestly," Rilla admitted, "I think I chalked it up to the Keep being off. Unless you think that's *why* it's unwell…? The loneliness thing is a hypothesis."

"No, that *feels* correct."

"That's not empirical."

"Does it have to be?"

She clicked her tongue and crinkled her nose. "I guess it depends on our goal. Wait, was the seasons thing your quest?"

"It was. It is."

Rilla steepled her fingers. "Tell me everything, we'll make a side-by-side timeline. Damien, would you please flip over the board?"

Damien adjusted a mounted corkboard to display an assortment of pinned notes and sketches, with a red yarn. "I think this might be the poet's cue to find something else to occupy myself." He gave them both a warm smile. "Let me know when you've cracked it."

"We might not," Arum grumbled.

"Ha! A likely story. I'll bring you some tea later. Rest your leg."

⁂

In the end, Damien brought them tea twice and dinner in the evening, and came to the workroom a final time, arms folded and trying to project a sternness foreign to his face. "The mysteries will be here tomorrow, and your maps, starcharts, barometers, graduated cylinders, measuring tapes, and mandrake roots will be safe overnight."

"Damien, we're so close!" Rilla insisted, glowing with hope.

"…Arum, when she says 'close,' does she mean 'half an hour,' or does she mean 'filled with conviction that all that's needed is to fling hours at the problem?"

"That's not fair," Arum protested.

Rilla shrugged, unbothered. “It’s pretty fair.”

Arum nearly pouted. “We have made too much progress to make an early night of it, Damien. Let us work.”

“My dear scientists, it’s two in the morning. You have *got* to go to bed. Stop pouting at me, Arum, I’ve no defenses against pouting.” Rilla rounded the workbench to bring her face alongside Arum’s, and pouted too. Damien gasped. “How could you! Ganging up on me like this! Saint Damien grant me your tranquility--next thing I know, they’ll be batting their eyelashes at me!” And so of course Arum and Rilla glanced at each other, turned their eyes back to Damien, and fluttered. Damien laid his hands over his chest. “Ooh-ooh-aahhhh, they’ve got me!” He staggered backwards. “My one weakness! Puppy-dog eyes!” He flung himself backwards onto Rilla’s mattress, curls framing his face in a fetching halo.

Rilla laughed and knelt by his side, kissing his face. “Oh dear, the kisses aren’t working, however are we to revive him?”

“Go to bed!” Damien mumbled.

“He’s awfully chatty for an unconscious man, Amaryllis.”

“Shh,” Damien countered. “No, I’m not.”

Arum took up his crutch with a nobly tragic air. “I suppose if we must delay our breakthrough to restore Lord Damien to our company, it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.” He made noisy motions towards the door. “I shall take to my bed, and I may even sleep--but I shall not enjoy it! No, I shall endure it *purely* for Damien’s sake…”

He glanced over his shoulder and caught Damien watching him with one eye open and a broad, closed-lip smile. The lord swiftly composed his face, but stage-whispered to Rilla: “He’s my favorite.”

The lady sprang to her feet. “I’m not above racing a man on a crutch, you know.” Arum upped his pace, clipping out the door and around the corner, while Rilla’s footsteps receded in the opposite direction. Arum stumbled and fell roughly onto his knees at the next turn, cursing and adjusting his grip on the crutch to pull himself back to his feet. “Is everyone alright?” Rilla called, her voice closer than Arum would have expected. “I heard a crash.”

“Fine!” Damien called back. “I’m just being clumsy, my love, I’ll join you in a moment.” And he was at Arum’s side. “You don’t have to let

me help you, but I am here."

Arum breathed deeply. "I--thank you, Damien. Yes, please." Damien let Arum loop his free arm around Damien's shoulders, and gingerly pulled them both to their feet.

"Shall I hang on for a bit?"

"Perhaps that would be wise."

They reached the little infirmary without further incident. Damien poured Arum a dose of medicine while the latter removed his tunic and unbraided his hair. "Here, drink. Do you think you aggravated the injury? Would you prefer I tell Rilla you fell?"

"No--yes--I don't care, I suppose. Don't lie for me, my lord."

Damien shrugged expressively. "Rilla sees through all my lies anyway. Birthday presents are a trial." He blinked. "What a shame I can't actually remember any birthdays." He smiled at Arum. "Done with your vile anti-hurt juice? I'll pour you the sleep tincture if you think your mind won't quiet."

"I shall try to sleep without it first." Arum cleared his throat. "Lord Damien?"

"You've come over all serious. Don't tell me it's a question of accounting--aren't we past that? Our secret quests are in the open, so you are free to accept an infinite quantity of hospitality."

"Forgive me, but I do not feel so resolved. I need you to promise me--I need you to promise that any displeasure, or anger, or resentment will fall on me, and me alone."

Damien, hip leaning against the nightstand, cupped Arum's face in one hand. "My dear knight, I think you know in your heart that I cannot make promises about my emotions. I *can* promise that I will do everything in my power to be patient and reasonable, and not lash out. And I do promise."

"I returned to sender," Arum explained sheepishly. He expected to watch Damien realize slowly that Arum had spent the day only with himself and Amaryllis, but the green man merely nodded.

"That's very sweet of you. Did she give you one back?"

“No--no. I don’t know how I feel about it, being your conduit.”

“I sincerely beg your pardon, Arum. It was never my desire for you to be uncomfortable, and I am certain Rilla feels the same, though we did not discuss it.”

“I didn’t say I needed an *apology* . I said I’m trying to work out how it makes me *feel* .”

“Good things?”

“ *Yes* . Inconveniently so. But also--I am not, am I?”

“Not what?”

“Just your conduit.”

“Oh! *Sweetheart* . No, never.”

Arum sighed with relief. “Amaryllis said the same. Except she called me darling.”

Damien smoothed Arum’s hair. “Would you like a kiss goodnight?” Arum nodded, so Damien gave him a long, soft kiss before pressing lightly on the join of his chest and shoulder to make him lie down. When Arum had, Damien kissed him again. “Sleep well. You can overthink things in the morning.”

“I never do that,” Arum protested, already sliding into sleep. “I think about things exactly the proportionate amount.”

⁂

“I shall go mad,” Arum whined. “Or perhaps I already have. This is infuriating.”

Rilla patted his shoulder. “It’s alright. Honestly, I’m impressed you even know that this is the sort of thing you used to know.”

“Magic.” Arum rolled the word around his mouth like a watermelon seed he wanted to spit out. “Why would I have ever known the difference between types of spell? Was I a *witch* in the beforetimes? Can you be a witch and a knight?”

Rilla fiddled with a pencil. She had laced late-lingering nandina berries through her antlers. “Tell me about witches, Arum.”

“They use the magic of living things to work their spells, often imbuing themselves with magical characteristics in the process. Or doing so *is* their process. Monsters have magic all on your own--don’t you have magic, Amaryllis?”

Rilla gave a slow, expressive shrug. “We’ve been able to rig some things to work with magic, and found some prepared magic in the Keep. Jars of powder and stuff. Angelo’s good at them, but I can’t get the knack. If I ever had talent, I forgot about it.”

“Tell me how memory works.”

“Are you done telling me about witches?”

“I am finding myself full of inexplicable contempt, the objectiveness of which I doubt. If I was a witch, I must not have thought it my best quality.”

Rilla twirled the pencil pensively. “Our explicit and implicit memories are working--facts, and things we’ve learned so well we no longer have to think about them, like tying a knot. It’s the biographical memory that none of us can manage.”

“But the things we *think* we know? Like that you and Damien think you are married, or that I am a knight. I think that because, a fortnight before the solstice, I woke up in the Citadel with armor strewn across my floor, as if I’d peeled it off before falling into bed. And because the Queen is so clearly my mother. But suppose she doesn’t know for sure that she is a queen? Suppose she woke up in the most luxurious bed, and thought she must be?”

“I mean, Damien and I woke up in the same bed, wearing matching nightclothes. If we’re not married, we’re close enough as to make no practical difference.”

“But that’s just the problem! If our lives are nothing more than a series of context clues--what if we can’t identify the nature and range of the disquiet, because some basic inference is incorrect?”

“We have to let *some* things be true, or you’re right: we will go mad. I can’t bear to sit here and say that ‘perhaps we are wrong in our memory of the climate, maybe we’ve always lived within a mathematically precise circle of the world which receives summer late and roughly.’”

“No, you’re right, it beggars belief. And we cannot waste our time on

the facts that feel like facts, even if facts do not exist."

"Facts do exist!" Rilla snapped. They had gone three rounds with this argument already, without fruitful resolution. "I'm sorry. I know, I know--all fact is relative, as facts can be bent and broken with the intervention of mortals."

"I apologize as well, I should not have returned to the subject. And you *are* correct, we have to grant stable concepts as givens, if the whole world was not rewritten."

"Which, I suppose, it may have been."

"No, we know it wasn't--or why would our scouts have found an edge to the stalled seasons?"

"Fair enough. Then we go in the middle. What's too big and yet too small for us to have scrutinized?"

"A breadbox." Rilla dipped her hand in a jar of distilled water and flicked some at him. Arum leaned back in Rilla's armchair, summoning all his resources for concentration, and covered his eyes with his forearm. "What if we woke up in the wrong beds? That would throw all our personal conceptions."

"...Okay, but would that do a diddly-damn thing for us deciding how to approach the seasons being stuck, our memories restricted, and the Keep hollow?"

"I regret to say, probably not."

⁂

They worked so long that Angelo and Rilla's brothers had dined and settled into individual pursuits for the night before Damien was able to tempt them to eat with him. The trio took supper on the lawn, building sandwiches and spooning pistachio custard from striped little bowls. Arum was disheartened: he and Rilla were richer by numerous interesting ideas, but no course of action, nor even a worthwhile lead. They laid out their thoughts before Damien, who made thoughtful noises at gratifying moments and took on a quiet, far-eyed mood while he turned the matter over. Arum stretched out, misjudging his space and landing with his head in Damien's lap. Damien and Rilla both laughed, charmed, and the green poet stroked Arum's forehead with one hand, lacing the other through Rilla's fingers.

“The question, I think, is who stands to gain. The answer is likely to be no one at all--I could imagine a criminal hindering our memories, or a great many people stealing something from the Keep. Why would someone want to prevent summer’s arrival? They did not stop time. Is what they have done any less complicated than that?”

Arum frowned deeply. “No--no, I think you’re right. We’ve been looking at *what* was done, and *how* .”

Rilla, leaning part of her weight on Damien, hummed agreement. “I suppose on the ‘fixing it’ level the motive is irrelevant, but it’s looking more and more like we won’t have enough information until we work out who cast the spell. Or spells.”

“I hate this,” Arum added, voice quiet. “I can *feel* the inaccessibility of my memories. I knew something relevant about spellcraft, but it’s so tied up in my biography it’s been forbidden to me.”

“I know,” Damien agreed. “It was worse in the first few weeks, before those of us who live in the Keep admitted the loss. The others would say things to me, either assuming I would know, or probing to solidify their own memories--and I would feel this horrible ache of alienation. Which of course meant I wanted to discuss it even less, and we were all bluffing our ways around each other.”

“I don’t think it was that bad for me. I must not have been a terribly social person before. I have--well, I have one friend and my mother.”

Amaryllis, her antlers throwing lacy shadows across her face, looked down at Arum. “And us now, too.”

“Damien said he thinks I may have had you before…?” Arum’s voice was shy to his own ears, rasping strongly as if to hide the fact, but only making it more apparent.

She turned her face, tip of her nose brushing Damien’s cheek. “I didn’t know that.”

He opened one hand slowly, in absence of a comfortable shrug. “I loved you both as soon as I saw you,” he explained, as though he thought it must have been obvious. “So either we knew each other, or my heart is easy like a knife through butter.”

“...Or both,” the other two teased, in one voice.

Arum wiggled in Damien’s lap, though he would never have admitted

wiggling was the appropriate word. Rilla whispered something in Damien's ear that made him divert a laugh through his nose and mouth "Behave!" Arum didn't want her to behave, but he wanted even less to admit this aloud. "Now look what you've done," Damien tsked, "he's gone all pink."

Rilla led Damien's hand to trail his green fingers along Arum's cheek. "You complement each other nicely." Arum shivered, let them see it, exhaled unsteadily.

"Tell me what you want," Rilla ordered sweetly.

"Which one?"

"You, and then Damien."

Arum half-closed his eyes, as if that would help. "I want to suck on his fingers."

"Oh!" from Damien, and a satisfied noise from Rilla. "Amaryllis? Should I need permission to let him?"

"No," she replied, reluctantly. "I don't think I ought to be in charge of how you touch each other, this time." Arum shifted his head and caught Damien's fingertips with his mouth. Damien cooperated, following the coaxing curl of Arum's tongue deeper inside. Rilla half-sang and half-hummed the sort of song people dance to at the end of a night. Damien leaned on her, a distant, soft look spreading over his face. Rilla pecked his jaw. "Are you floating?"

"Hmm? Nah. Just feels nice."

Arum withdrew his mouth. "I've been impatient all night to come up with an excuse to kiss you both, a great many times in a variety of places, but I begin to think we can bear it if I simply suggest we go somewhere with a bed."

"Scandalous," Damien teased. "I need to water the herb garden, or it shan't get done. Meet you in the bedroom?"

Fitt III

Chapter Notes

> In my outline this chapter was simply "they take to bed at an appropriate interval." My beta reader tells me that this phrase is an earworm, so I had to preserve it for posterity.

Damien arrived only just after Arum, who was blushing while Rilla tried to tamp down laughter. “Amaryllis,” the knight explained, with great dignity in his posture and a badly-hidden laugh in his voice, “has noticed that I went to take my medicine and came back more dressed up.”

The green lord embraced him loosely. “Are you really up for this? Your leg, dear heart--we cannot risk your recovery! Rilla, tell him not to be foolish--”

“I’m not going to let him do anything athletic. He’s well enough, love, only sore.”

Arum kissed him--hard, bossily--to underscore the point. “My blue balls ache more than my leg,” he grumbled. Damien swayed gently forward, anchoring himself as an afterthought with palms on Arum’s shoulder and chest, and laughed at himself.

“Well, I suppose there are one or two outstanding points in your oral argument. Although, to be perfectly scrupulous--”

Rilla hopped off the bed and caught Damien’s waist. Arum shifted further into Damien’s personal space, sandwiching him between their bodies, and reached around to curl a hand against Rilla’s thigh. Damien made a birdlike noise that implied a willingness to be devoured. She kissed the side of his neck, where Arum’s stitches had healed and scarred into a regular pattern of raised bumps. “So much thinking,” she remarked, tone neutral. “Are you ready to stop?”

Damien met Arum’s eyes, the latter shrugging slowly and smirking at the way Damien’s eyes traced the movement. “Well,” Damien conceded, voice bubbling in playfulness, “I’m sure my thoughts will still be here when we’re done.” Rilla hummed agreement and very deliberately moved her hands to the fastenings of Damien’s leggings. The lord caught Arum’s hands and drew them to his clavicle, where his shirt was open and waiting to be unfastened entirely. Arum, for his

part, was happy to oblige. He met Rilla's eyes; the lady tilted her head back in the direction of the bed. Arum understood right before she took a gliding step. He advanced in her wake, the two of them nudging Damien into joining the rhythm of their clumsy waltzing three-legged-race to the bed, where they lost their balance and fell in a tangle of limbs and hot breaths.

Arum kissed the warm body his mouth was pressed against without stopping to determine the particulars. Rilla let out an approving noise, and he realized he had kissed the side of her breast. He moved his hands to hold her ribcage, and kissed her higher on her chest, where the skin was exposed. She fumbled with her cropped blouse, pushing him away long enough to throw it to the floor and leave herself in nothing but her patterned sarong. Damien kissed her spine, while Arum hesitated just long enough for Rilla to tap his lips and then her sternum with two fingers. He knew she expected him to return to her breasts, but he was struck with another idea, and tried to position his head so that he would kiss the front of her torso at the same time Damien kissed her back. Rilla clutched the quilt and moaned, arcing her body minutely and unconsciously between them.

Damien kissed the back of her shoulder, so Arum surged up onto his knees to kiss the other side, and their foreheads touched. When they lifted their faces, Damien tipped Arum's chin up and kissed him, Rilla wrapping an arm around Arum and reaching behind herself with her free hand to caress Damien's flank. Arum leaned into the kiss, inspiring his leg to give him a sharp, belated twinge. The others saw the pain-furrow in his brow just as the kiss ended, exchanged a look with each other, and proceded to nudge Arum to lie flat on his back. He pouted, irritated with the limits of his body, but they lay on either side of him and rained kisses onto his face until he was laughing from deep in his belly and squirming into the explorations of their hands.

Rilla pressed a hand down on his hip. "Do you think you can be good and keep your leg still?"

Arum looked skeptically down the line of his body. "What's the alternative?"

"Oh, I've got silk rope around here somewhere…"

"Or we can stop. Stopping's always an option." Damien was cuddled against Arum, hair mussed, eyes shining, erection plain. Arum recognized his need for reassurance and kissed the top of his head.

“Rilla’s taking care of us,” he reminded him.

“I’ll stop worrying when you start admitting it when you hurt.”

Arum tsked, the tip of his tongue dragging against the roof of his mouth in an under-satisfying way. “I hurt. You’re distracting me. Orgasms would be even better.” He turned his face back to Rilla. “Can the ‘not moving my leg’ accord begin after we get my pants off?”

She laughed. “I might have to insist on it, honestly.” Arum grinned at her and lifted his hips pointedly.

Damien kissed the side of Arum’s mouth. “Can--can I--”

Arum was content to give him as much time as he needed, but Damien had flushed darker green under his scrutiny, and seemed in danger of pretending not to have spoken. The knight gave Damien’s ass an affectionate, possessive squeeze. “You almost certainly can.”

Rilla began unlacing Arum’s fly. Damien closed his eyes and tried to hide his face in Arum’s chest. “May I offer you my mouth, Sir Arum?” Arum blushed and twitched; Rilla caught his leggings and underclothes by the waistband and pulled, tossing them to the floor with great satisfaction. Arum kissed Damien sweetly in answer and disentangled himself, sitting up and undressing the rest of the way.

Damien faintly brushed his fingers along a prominent vertical scar across Arum’s lower ribs, hand trembling as if he had forgotten, in the moments since they had last touched, that the knight’s skin was warm. The look on his face suggested that he had been unexpectedly permitted to caress a famous sculpture or holy relic, and feared it was possible to do so incorrectly. Arum felt an ironic tug at his finer feelings to give Damien some form of privacy, and so turned his face to Rilla, who was kicking her skirt over the side of the bed. He reached out with his free hand, silently requesting permission to guide her arm. She misunderstood his intent, squeezing his hand in her own and slowly drawing the knuckles between her lips. He shivered, breathed an incomplete suggestion, and at last kissed the freckled inner crook of her elbow, where the periphery of his bricked-over memory knew her nerves would sing. She made an extraordinary noise and bent double, eyes screwed shut. Arum smiled against her skin, and flicked his tongue against the most delicate spot. She shrieked in overwhelmed pleasure, jerking her arm free and laughing without her full breath, tweaking Arum’s nipples in fair return, and kissing his brow when he sputtered and wrestled away from, and then

back into, her hands.

Something about watching this, seeing Arum earthy, blushing, biting his lip and submitting to Rilla by inches, gave Damien the permission he needed. He sat up to lay a soothing hand on Arum's stomach, where his insides were jumping with ticklishness and need, before curling his other hand around Arum's inner thigh. Arum would have been happy for Damien to put his strength to use and push his knees apart, but he knew Damien didn't work like that, unless ordered to. He risked letting Damien see him watching, and bumped Damien's chest with his foot, his hands being busily buried in Rilla's hair. "Take your shirt off, honeysuckle."

All he had to do was push the open shirt off his shoulders and set to work, but he peeked at Arum through his eyelashes, and Arum realized with a pleased start that Damien knew perfectly well that he was beautiful. There was a skill here, of knowing the minutiae of his own body from years of worthy use, a part of him that had noticed what lovers liked best about how the light hit his cheekbones, the brief moment where cloth caught on his biceps as he undressed, a minor shift of his hips. Arum's mind supplied him more readily with mystery than romance, and he knew it. He was intensely grateful that the poet knew how to supply conscious beauty--it felt as though he'd been handed permission to display himself as well, after months of harsh weather and stress had stripped his familiarity with doing things for nourishment and not subsistence. He breathed deeply, his limbs loosening and lips parting. "Fuck, I'm so wet," he exhaled--not elegant, but it made Rilla hum her amusement against his jaw, both of them transfixed by the sight of their pretty warrior smiling shyly as he stretched out between Arum's legs and took his nub into his warm, sweet mouth.

Arum whimpered without trying to stop himself, squirmed with pleasure and gave Damien's curls an approving pull. Rilla sucked Arum's earlobe into her own mouth for the satisfaction of watching him break into gooseflesh. He felt her eyes running down his body, assessing his posture for strain on his leg. He wished she would stop--or no, he was unspeakably grateful for her care and expertise, but wished she wasn't so damned distracing. "Damien, give me your fingers! Two of them, right now," he bossed, eager for more sensation. "Oh, that's fucking lovely, *good* boy." Rilla relaxed beside him and stole one of his hands from Damien's scalp, guiding it until the heel of his hand pressed against her pelvic arch. He gasped her name and slowly curled his fingers into her, watching her face ease into smug-cat wordless praise. Arum and Rilla nuzzled closer together until the

tips of their noses touched, breath ghosting warmly across each other's lips. Arum told Damien to curl his fingers, curling his own inside Rilla so that they gasped together. Damien hummed approvingly, letting it ripple through Arum, and reached over without looking to give Rilla's leg an affectionate stroke.

They continued in this vein for some time, Arum offering Damien suggestions or orders and mirroring his motions for Rilla, who introduced instructions of her own for them both. She came first, accidentally knocking her antlers against the top of Arum's skull. She widened her eyes at him in horror, still moaning through an aftershock, but he merely laughed, kissing her temple--and Damien did something unexpected with his tongue, and Arum buried his face in her shoulder as he followed her over the edge.

He faded into his own body, only aware of his lovers through a dreamy fog. Damien kissed his thighs and disappeared from the bed; next Arum knew, he and Rilla were cuddling with a casual intimacy he would have gladly watched all night. They looked beautiful together. They looked *right* together, and Arum's tongue outran his brain: "Oh. I did come between you, after all." He snort-giggled, and the two of them pulled him into the embrace, and that was exactly as it should have been.

Rilla kissed Arum's forehead. "What do you think we should do to Damien?" Arum could feel the hair on Damien's limbs stand up, along with the unhurried weight of his soft eyes and hard cock.

"If I had my breath back, I would be wishing I had packed a strap-on."

Damien squeaked. Rilla smirked, and addressed Arum, in the manner of an empress asking her most favored advisor's opinion. "Do you want to watch me fuck his darling...well, actually. Damien?"

"Hmm?"

"Where do you want to be fucked?" She didn't need to ask if he wanted it more generally, given the way he had bitten his lip and rocked against Arum's thigh when she began this line of thought.

"Oh! Rilla, my heart, would it suit you to take me between my thighs?" His fingers fluttered.

"Does that meet with Sir Arum's approval? Does it suit us to fuck his darling thighs?"

Arum liked the way she said “us.” “I’d say he’s rather earned it, Amaryllis.” He kissed Damien’s fingertips, and the hollow of his throat, the smile lines at the corner of his eye, his cupid’s bow. Rilla presently tossed Arum a small glass jar of lubricant. Damien rested his head on Arum’s chest and gave his lower body a half-twist to allow Arum to slide one slick hand across his thighs and undercarriage. Arum buried his face in Damien’s green curls and breathed in his honeysuckle perfume. When he lifted his eyes, he could just see Rilla fiddling with the buckles of her harness. She *did* have freckles on her ass, but only because she seemed to have freckles over her whole body. It seemed to Arum that years had passed since he had blushed to see her in the Citadel’s stable. He wished he could stay in the Keep until he really had spent years arguing and laughing and breaking bread and making love with Amaryllis and Damien.

Assuming that he hadn’t done so already, and forgotten about it.

He closed his eyes tightly, and gave Damien’s length a particularly indulgent stroke to relieve his feelings. Rilla settled onto the bed and play-scolded him. “You’ll have him finished before I get started.”

Damien huffed out something that was likely a complete sentence in his head, but amounted to “Ha! Call *this* …jus’…start?” Arum manhandled him onto his side to give Rilla better access. Her strap and harness had both been tinted a warm pink, and Arum caught himself admiring the craftsmanship alongside the bone-heating sight of her sure, swift slide between Damien’s legs. Damien, for his part, crossed his ankles and followed her rhythm. Arum sat back at first, watching their cooperation and the regular glimpse of Rilla’s pink between Damien’s green. Both of them were watching his face, Damien falling apart, searching Arum’s expression for admiration, and Rilla grinning as if to say *look what we’ve done* .

He kissed their mouths and settled his body next to them. One hand for Damien, tracing his tender places. The other for Rilla, their hands folding together in the pillows above their heads. Damien came beautifully, upper body leaning into Arum’s embrace, lower body leaning into Rilla’s attentions. Arum, sticky and flustered, helped himself to another orgasm without fanfare, and allowed himself to be rude and spoiled while Rilla gave them all a matter-of-fact wipe down with a soft, wet cloth. Arum dozed happily, all three of them warm and still beneath a quilt. Rilla hummed absently, and the others harmonized with her.

He came back to himself with a start after an indeterminate length of

time. “The Keep only has one voice.” He sat upright abruptly. “Its nature is that of a self-duet. That is what it is missing.”

“How’d’you know?” Damien yawned.

“I *remember* it.” He hummed a different tune. “My mother sang that to me when I was young, and she sings it to me now that I am grown, and--but you call the *Keep* my ‘mom,’ Amaryllis.”

“No I don’t. When did I say that?”

“Before you taught me *this* song, ‘Meet Me by the River,’ except I don’t know *when* that was, because I was most certainly humming it by reflex just now, and *please* stop trying to gently turn my face, Damien, if I have to look at you I shall--”

Damien’s hands on his face shook. “You must speak your heart, Sir Arum, even if it breaks mine.”

Arum snorted. “You’re so fragile I don’t always understand how you can be real. No, don’t be foolish, it’s only that I cannot look at you because you look at me like you are still learning my face, but I know every callus of your hands, and I cannot *bear* it!”

“Alright,” Damien soothed. “Shut your eyes and be still for a minute.” Arum unjustly resented this--if he had his druthers, he’d chase the idea until he had worked himself into a froth of inspiration, or frustration. “My sweet marzipan apple. I know how you feel, but I am weeks past this state of mind, and you must listen when I promise you it is not so very terrible.”

“How can you--”

“Shush! There are only two possible roads ahead of us, Arum. The first is that we will regain our memories. The other is that we will re-establish our relationship without them. I will not pretend to know the relative opacity of your heart, but we share an understanding, the three of us, that we have *been* lovers, and will *continue* to be.”

“Did I miss that conversation?”

“Didn’t we just have it?”

Arum flushed and folded his arms. “You’re sappy and perfect, and I hate you just a little bit, because I’d rather be screaming and rending my garments.” Rilla, he sensed, was trying to give Damien latitude to

work, but she let loose a sympathetic snort.

“I am not trying to say that your fears are unreasonable, but they are, if you will forgive me, somewhat immaterial. There is no tragic outcome, love. We will take care of each other. And now I’ve made you cry, oh, I *am* sorry.”

“I am not crying,” Arum insisted, through tears. He felt around, eyes still shut, for Rilla’s hand, which he squeezed. She squeezed back.

She let him sniffle quietly for a few minutes. “I don’t want to bother you if you still need, like, a minute. But do you want to hear something interesting?”

“Do I ever not?” He peeked through his damp lashes at her. Her dimples showed.

“Well, it’s just that I’ve been looking at your ring.” The one on his right hand, which she held; the one shaped like a dew-kissed leaf. “Damien,” she explained slowly, “has one just like it.” The lord splayed the fingers of his left hand, where he wore two rings on the same finger. One was the twin of Arum’s, and the other was covered by miniscule gold discs, overlapping like armor plates, or scales.

“Oh!” Damien exclaimed. “How romantic!”

“And how foolish, that we did not notice sooner.”

Damien did not roll his eyes, but he looked like he was thinking about it. “Give me your other hand, let me see that ring.”

Arum complied. “Don’t tell me--Rilla has an identical one,” he snarked.

“Oh, of course not.” Arum was amazingly disappointed. “She has a rose-colored ring with pearls showing her *own* constellation; they were clearly personalized with great care, sir knight!”

Rilla laughed. “Tell us how you *really* feel. That solves the mystery of who gave them to us, I think. I don’t really wear mine, I work too much with my hands, but I’ll get it out if you want to see it. I also have one that matches Damien’s, if you were wondering. It’s part of why we were so sure we were married.”

“I suppose we all may have been a bit more than lovers, then, since we exchanged rings thricefold.”

“I’m not sure your implication is possible, but it’s a nice thought.”

The three of them settled back into the bed, touching each other with idle tenderness, and drifted back towards sleep. Arum turned over Damien’s words in his mind. *I loved you both as soon as I saw you. There is no tragic outcome, love.* He thought about Rilla’s surety of touch and laughter. More than the rings, their combined power to understand him on a level he could not articulate had him convinced that there was a great storeroom in his forbidden memories, dedicated to the pair of them. He loved them, he realized, with a frightening intensity, and he wished so badly he could remember how they got here. What was it like, the first time they, er, took to bed? He sat up abruptly, horror rising in his gut. “Fuck!”

Rilla squinted up at him with badly-disguised irritation. “I apologize,” he told her--told them both--“I would also like this to stop happening. *My mother* . You said (on some occasion we cannot recall) that the Keep is my mother, and I know the Queen as my mother, and she...she sings to communicate. She has the missing voice. Or she *is* the missing voice.” Rilla sat up. Damien put a forearm over his face.

“Arum. Is that even possible?”

He thought about it. “It is the same problem as earlier--I know nothing, save that it *is* . It is my instinct; the facts do not matter. No, I apologize. The facts are immaterial, because our only option is to establish them freshly.” He took a deep breath. “In the morning. Not now.”

“Oh, *good boy* ,” Damien breathed, with only a pinch of sarcasm.

Fitt IV

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains light spoilers for "The Devil in the Sunlight."

“Where does Quanyii live? I mean! I beg your pardon. Good morning, Amaryllis. Thank you for the coffee, which smells wonderful. Also, where does Quanyii live?”

Rilla grinned at him. “You’re lucky you *aren’t* wooing me for the first time,” she teased. “I haven’t got a clue where she lives, but Marc knows. Why do you ask?”

Arum had put the oatmeal cookie she brought in his mouth. “Witch,” he mumbled. He flicked the covers off, holding the cookie in his mouth and the cup in one hand, trying to dress with the other. Rilla hid a smile and helped. “I want to bounce our limited memories off of her own, and see where that gets us. The important questions are as follows: is the Queen the voice, or does she carry the voice? If the latter, did she obtain it by force? And how do we restore the Keep, who is pining for itself?”

Rilla looked pensive. “Quanyii doesn’t give straight answers. It’ll be hard to tell whether anything she says is usable. But you’re right, we should try.”

Damien, when they asked him to accompany them, was aghast, slack-jawed. “You want to talk to *Quanyii* ? Rilla--we agreed!”

“Damien, it doesn’t matter anymore--”

“I beg your pardon!”

“--because *Arum* --”

“Has met her exactly once, and she performed no mischief save rudeness!”

“Damien! If Arum doesn’t remember anything, *maybe Quanyii doesn’t either.* ” He folded his arms and rocked on his heels in agitation. Arum felt rather out to sea. He wished he knew what they were arguing about. He was, as we have already discussed, an especially opinionated man, and it was vexing to listen to them volley between themselves without getting to argue too. “And,” Rilla continued, “if

Quanyii is in the same situation we are, maybe we're on the same side."

"I don't trust her."

She flashed him a grin. "That's why we want you to come. If she wants to pull the wool over our eyes, she'll have to work so much harder with you standing to one side, being morally outraged."

Damien drew his shoulders back. "I suppose moral outrage is an important element of curse-breaking. Where *does* she live?"

⁂

Marc gave them a cheerful wave when they found him on the bank of the moat. Dampierre rested nearby, and the mermaid had been receiving a knitting lesson from Angelo, the minotaur's big hands moving swiftly through stitches. Talfryn sat with them, coloring in a study of a bird with a pastel stick, all three involved in a word game with rules Arum did not intuit. Rilla explained who they sought and why. Marc grimaced. "I promised I wouldn't tell anyone!" He put his hand up. "Oh, don't worry, I'm gonna help you out, I just need to think of a way to do it that *doesn't* involve me being served grilled with a nice squeeze of lemon."

"She threatened you?" Damien exclaimed.

Marc made a face. "A threat was made."

"But...not by Quanyii?"

"There are a lotta scary people in this swamp, Damien!" He gave them a broad wink. "Scary women in particular. One especially scary woman. Who might be inclined to do some grilling. If provoked. Or possibly without provocation. Not a people person. I've heard she's a big hit in her neck of the woods, but she'd be big anywhere. Please tell me these hints are helping, guys, I dunno how long I can keep this up!"

Damien gave a little start. "Are you talking about the *dragoness* ?" Angelo gasped as if greatly impressed.

"I dunno," Marc replied, again winking unmissably. " *Am* I?"

Talfryn frowned. "Her territory's pretty big, Marc. Is that enough for them to go on?"

Marc lifted a single finger in confidence, before wrinkling his face and dropping it into his hands. “Dammit! There’s nothing for it--Dampierre and I will come with. We’ll play it by ear. Dampierre!” The kelpie had fallen asleep, ears twitching as if dreaming of...whatever watery horses might eat. Water chestnuts? Apples, like any other horse? Marc sighed, tossed his knitting aside, and slid into the water. Angelo tutted over Marc’s carelessness, storing the knitting away properly in a basket, but Arum’s attention was drawn to the swimmer. He had little use of his tail, propelling himself with smooth strokes of his arms. Little wonder he and Dampierre were rarely far apart, even in water--Marc had to expend so much energy that long solo trips would be out of the question. The kelpie awoke with dudgeon, snorting his displeasure at being denied his nap, but sweetening swiftly when Marc whispered something in his ear and kissed his nose. Marc swung onto his back and waved at his friends. “C’mon. Maybe we can find Quanyii and get out before we get flambéed.”

⁂

The mouse’s house lay outside the swamp, north of the place Arum had entered it. Marc explained on the journey that he had only found it by accident, in the midst of hunting a giant numb-wasp with a variety of experimental impedimenta. “...And she gave me peaches jarred in moonshine, which were exactly what you’re imagining.”

“Stronger than they had any right to be?”

Marc kissed two of his fingers. “ *Exactly* . I ain’t saying they weren’t delicious! But did they knock me out like a light? Yes!”

“The more I hear about Quanyii, the less I understand why Talfryn brought her to the Keep.”

“Same reason we kept eating the peaches. If we were really careful, we’d have a lot of fun and wake up without a headache.”

Arum ducked under a branch. “Is she spiteful?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that. Thoughts?”

Rilla shrugged. “She’s *petty* .”

“But--” Arum shook his head. “It matters not. I hate not knowing people’s motivations. I cannot decide how honest with her we ought to be.”

“You don’t really have time now, Skin. Fair Quanyii lives in yon red-roofed cottage! Yes, I tell no lies, I *do* mean that impossibly twee building with the picket fence and the frankly enormous dog on the welcome mat!” Arum wondered if the witch had copied it from an illustration, and whether she had been motivated more by taste or a desire to misdirect. He had an eerie inkling that, if he looked away, it would return to a still picture, fixing ladybugs in their flight and the dog with his tongue licking his chops. There were *lawn ornaments* in the flower beds--a chubby-cheeked child made of cement pushing a tiny wheelbarrow with pansies planted in it, a small flock of flamingos on stakes. The gate was unlatched, but Arum approached the hound with trepidation. He held out his hand, and the dog gave him a polite sniff and a small lick, but made no effort to budge. Arum leaned over his bulk to rap the door knocker, which was shaped like a glossy pair of cherries. There were plants like this house in the swamp, which lured prey in with bright colors and sweet smells, and then slowly digested them. (The other possibility, that anyone’s home life was just this cute, seemed more unbelievable by the second.)

The door swung open with a music-box chime. Arum considered exchanging a disturbed glance with one of his companions, but it offended him to think Quanyii would approve of such melodrama. He hopped over the dog decisively. “Quanyii!”

“In the kitchen, sweets!” Arum stuck his head through a doorway to his right. The kitchen was oddly illegible, all flat, smooth surfaces in powder pink. A kettle bubbled brightly atop what must have been a stove, but there was no discernable flame. Quanyii sat on a table, where a teacup was perched on a bunsen burner. The room reeked of mushroom powder and sage. “Oooh, it’s the big bad knight! Don’t make me turn you into a toad--or a lizard--my little lily-liver.” His voice was different today, as was his manner, but the same spirit of capriciousness glowed in his eyes.

Damien leaned against the doorframe, hip brushing Arum’s. “Good Quanyii! I don’t suppose you’d be willing to call your dog? Marc cannot get over the threshold.”

Quanyii put his tiny paws on his hips. “ *Good* ness, one uninvited guest is a special treat, but three”--she caught sight of Rilla--“ *four* guests are always either too much fun, or none at all! Oh very well, one of you grab his collar and let Marc in, let anyone you want in, by all means, I’m positively *starved* for the company!” Arum hoped that wasn’t a cannibalism pun. Rilla coaxed the dog into the kitchen, and Arum watched, wide-eyed, as Dampierre carried Marc into the house.

It shouldn't have worked--they couldn't possibly have fit--and yet here they were, brushing easily between Arum and Damien into the kitchen, Dampierre folding his legs onto an oval rainbow rug. This made no sense--the two men filled the narrow doorway--Marc shouldn't have been able to squeeze through even *without* a kelpie.

The dog pushed against his legs, begging for attention. Arum ruffled his fur awkwardly. "Aww," Quanyii cooed. "Come here, Gawain! Daddy has a bikkie for you!" The dog put his front paws on the kitchen table and licked Quanyii from toe to top. His fur stuck out at odd angles, and his tiny straw hat was knocked off altogether. His whiskers took on a pouty angle, but he lifted a dog biscuit over his head like a weightlifter does a barbell, and Gawain took it gingerly, retreating beneath the table to eat it.

"The dog's name is Gawain?" Arum checked.

Quanyii dusted crumbs off his paws. "Sure is! Why, does that mean something to you?"

Arum gave him a confused shrug. "Only that I have never heard the name before."

Quanyii, to his unending frustration, is unable to break the fourth wall. But you and I shall exchange an amused smile, and leave Quanyii itching to make a joke at Arum's expense, if only he knew what was so funny.

Rilla cleared her throat. "Quanyii. We need your…"

" *Help* ? Sweetcheeks, I never thought I'd see the day!"

" *Perspective* ."

"So you made poor Marc bring you to see lil ol' me? Must be *pretty* important."

"Please don't be mad at him."

"Why would I be mad to see my dear friends?!"

Marc looked uncomfortable. "Just don't tell…" he lowered his voice to a whisper, " *Caroline* ."

Quanyii delicately lifted a paw to his chest. "Oh, dollface, I would *never* --"

“Oh, that’s a relief!”

“--keep a secret from my *wife* . But if she doesn’t ask a direct question, well! I’m certainly not going to bring it up.”

Arum’s patience ran out with a sharp bang. “Can you remember anything further back than a fortnight before the winter solstice?”

Quanyii blinked. “That’s a mighty personal question!”

“No, it isn’t. Quanyii, please, I know you are afraid. Work with us.” The mouse’s nostrils flared. “Your calendar is open on the counter, I can *see* your notes. When last we spoke, you said yourself summer is not coming. We *must* assume that the only chance we have is to break the curse, because otherwise--otherwise, I think we will have to abandon this land. I--Quanyii. Please.”

The witch scowled down his little nose. “ *Fine* . What do you want to know?” Arum and Rilla took deep breaths in unison. Quanyii’s face filled with regret, followed rapidly by interest, surprise, and a careful neutrality as they explained their findings. “So,” he shrugged, “I’m not sure why you think *I* can help you--aside from me being *brilliant* , of course!”

“You remember how to do magic,” Arum grumbled. “Don’t you dare act evasive, you’re brewing a shrinking potion right now.”

“Know-it-all!” Arum glared at him. Quanyii tsked. “Fine. Use your noggin, sunshine. *Why* am I brewing a shrinking potion?”

“I...I have no idea.”

“Honestly! The three of you get all wrapped up in your lovey-dovey cocoon and forget other people have lives, too!”

Arum squinted at her in confusion. Damien clapped his hands together. “Oh! Is it for Caroline? But, no--if Dampierre can fit in here, you’ve solved that problem.”

Quanyii made a jazzy, mocking little gesture with his hands. “Look at him go! Solved it, and talked himself right out of it! I can’t quite get the space-stretching to work well enough for Caroline to come indoors. You have *no idea* how *frustrating* it is! My big, beautiful wife...can’t come into our small beautiful home...I can’t even spoon her, in case she rolls over in her sleep! I’m the *big spoon* ! I’m *Caroline’s* big spoon! This is the most *tragic* thing that’s ever happened

to me! Barring big-ticket items, but *they* hardly bear thinking about. Wait, I was making a point. Oh yes! What can you cuties *deduce* from my house being so small, when my wife is so big?"

Arum shrugged, exasperated. "You had the house first--but no. You're telling us you were not always in your present sizes." He remembered suggesting to Rilla that they had woken up in the wrong beds. "Did you *trade bodies* ?"

"This is really like watching peewee jousting. You just keep charging, and you're headed straight for it, and then you *don't* hit it! Listen, sweets. *You used to be a lizard* ."

"A lizard," Arum replied, flatly.

"A lizard-ish, bug-ish, man-ish monster."

"Ish? You're not *sure* ?"

"Of course not, *I* don't go around asking people to explain what kind of creature they are! You had scales. Four arms. Made a weird noise with your throat." Arum made an agitated rattling noise. "Ugh, *that* sounded like it hurt your sweet human vocal cords." He gave Arum a sidelong look. "You're not screaming in protest yet."

"I...am *processing* ." He slapped his forehead. "You're really human, because if you were a monster, you would not have resorted to witchcraft."

Quanyii shrugged. "Oh, I don't know about that! Nothing goes better with power than more power."

"Wait!" Marc sputtered. "Are you implying that the four of us," (he made a gesture encircling himself, Rilla, Damien, and Dampierre) "are *human* ?"

"Well. Not Dampierre. That would be *weird* !"

Marc let out a dismayed cry, but Rilla sighed with relief. "That explains why I can't stop banging my antlers on shit. I'm really *not* used to them!"

Damien shrugged slowly. "Far be it from me to say I'm uninterested, but I'm not sure that advances our inquiry."

Arum was still holding his hand to his forehead, as if it pained him.

“She cast the spell. No, all of you calm down. Quanyii. Someone very powerful has transformed *every person’s body* for an area of *miles* , and erased our memories, and stalled nature, and pillaged the Keep of half its soul. And perhaps I have the wrong culprit, but I have your measure, and you would have the true villain hanging by their thumbs in your cellar by now, if this was *not* your doing. *Shut up* . What were you trying to do, and how did it go wrong? You wouldn’t have filled the kitchen with calculations if you were pleased.”

Quanyii took hold of a pair of tongs, and used them to open an overhead cabinet, from which he withdrew a crystalline wine goblet, which he very carefully and artfully grasped in his paws. He cleared his throat, ensured that all eyes were on him, and let the goblet shatter on the floor. “Ohhhhh, my private agony has been revealed!” Damien lunged for Gawain’s collar as soon as he saw the glass fall, keeping him well out of the path of the shards, but Quanyii tsked and snapped his fingers, returning the goblet to its whole state. “As *if* I’d endanger a *dog* !” His visitors glowered at him. Quanyii sighed heavily. “I fucked it up, okay! Happy now? It was just going to be the role-reversal stuff, but I *guess* my reference materials weren’t quite up to snuff, or *possibly* my notes got messed with, or *maybe* I just did it wrong! It’s all different ways to say I fucked up!”

“We’re going to fix it,” Amaryllis promised, tone far gentler than Arum expected. “Keep going.”

“I set the timer so that the spell would end when spring did, only the conditional threads must have gone wrong. I know *you* follow me, Marc--you love stupid math stuff.” Quanyii smiled. He plainly liked stupid math stuff too.

“So--instead of your spell expiring, spring stuck around *because* your spell hadn’t ended?” He winced. “No wonder you’re so pissed about it.”

Arum frowned. “Then why did you not simply end it manually?”

Damien studied Quanyii’s face. “You don’t know how, do you?”

Quanyii threw his paws into the air. “Not a clue! The grimoire didn’t even suggest it might go wrong like this, and nothing I’ve tried has *worked* , and I can’t *ask* anyone, because your stupid brains shut down!”

“Was the memory loss not by design?”

“Maybe. I dunno. If it was, I didn’t notice that passage. It was supposed to teach you all a lesson about how other kinds of people live. The grimoire had *anecdotal evidence* !” Rilla winced. “What’s-their-name swapped a courtier and a dairymaid, and that worked! And they stopped a border skirmish with it, and I just thought--I thought it would--I wanted to--” His voice dropped to an almost inaudible whisper. “I hoped it would help.” Damien reached out and gave him a pat on the back with one finger. Arum was shocked Quanyii didn’t turn and bite it. The witch summoned his dignity. “Either the memory loss is part of making the body alteration convincing enough to be instructive, or it’s...like, the mind and body pushing up against each other, and something has to give. That happens sometimes.”

Rilla and Arum wore matching expressions of problem-solving, lining up this extraordinary exposition with their earlier work. Damien looked to Marc, who shrugged. Damien shook his head and burst out: “You still have failed to tell us *why* you would do such a thing!”

Quanyii looked at him like this was the most inexplicable thing he could have said. “For Olala!”

There was a pause. “Okay,” Marc sighed. “I’ll bite. What’s an olala?”

Quanyii brought his paws to his mouth in genuine horror. “I thought she was with you!”

Marc looked alarmed. “Why? Is she--” his face rapidly convulsed through several expressions of dismay. “ *I forgot about my daughter* .”

“Er, she isn’t your--”

“My own child! Whom I raised!”

“You didn’t--”

“I was there when she was born!”

“You were *not* --”

“How could I have forgotten *Olala* ?”

“Really, this whole conversation is an exercise in amazement, sweets.” He looked dismayed. “I wish I knew where she is.” A small shrug. “But Olala has a history of that. I’m sure she’s fine.”

Damien was unconvinced. “But she is, I take it, a *child* ?”

“Oh, sure. Most of the time, anyway. She’s a natural shapeshifter. Half-human, half-monster.” There was a collective intake of breaths. “Okay, maybe none of you remembering things has *some* benefits. I can’t *believe* I had the chance to shock you all with my marriage, *again* , and I didn’t *take* it!” The witch rifled through a spice rack. “Oh, *curses* . Pwetty Willa?”

“No.” Amaryllis indulged in the deepest, soul-scouring sigh her lungs could manage, drawing together her dwindling tolerance. “What is it?”

“I just want to make one teensy-weensy little divination spell (*you* know, just to see where the dear little half-half has gotten off to), only I’m missing a key component--”

“Spit it out.”

“I don’t suppose you have any St. Damien’s yarrow? The petals, sweet.”

“I--no. I used up my last crop, and what I replanted from its seeds hasn’t matured yet.”

Arum had not intended to help--it was plain that Quanyii’s claim and his intention could diverge greatly--but the mouse’s form crumpled in on itself like his last comfort had been snatched away. The witch, for all his impact, had only been trying to help a child--a child who was unlikely to be safe or welcome anywhere she found herself. At least when it had all spiraled out of Quanyii’s grasp, there had been the comforting assumption that Olala was safe with Marc, and the hope that the spell would lift, lesson learned, and her lot improved. He quietly searched through his bag and brought forth the square tin containing the remaining dried flowers from the crop of St. Damien’s yarrow he had grown from *his* Damien’s blood.

Quanyii took the tin with uncharacteristic solemnity, crumbling petals into a clean teacup and mixing in additional components in precise proportions. Arum very quietly reached out and took Damien’s hand. Rilla helped Quanyii swap his in-progress teacups, taking the shrinking potion off the burner and replacing it with the new concoction, which steamed heartbreaking gray-blue shades, like a storm-struck seaside. The witch waited for some subtlety in its appearance, clicking off the burner with a satisfied air, and swiftly upending the teacup onto his pristine kitchen table. The liquid spread, he struck the puddle with a wooden spoon, and the substance snapped

into a sharp-edged irregular plate, alike in texture to mirror-glass. Finally, Quanyii took a pin from a tomato-shaped cushion, and scratched OLALA into its surface. The letters glowed and faded.

The assembled company crowded around the table, peering into the...the viewbleck, Arum dimly remembered. Olala was a child of about ten or twelve years old, with cropped hair and square hands, playing checkers with a handsome man wearing baby's breath in his dreadlocked hair. "She is in the Citadel," Arum exclaimed.

"You recognize the room?"

"That man is my best friend. He is called Florian the Fair--and he is a knight." Olala threw her head back and laughed. The table they sat at was low, and the checkerboard had been raised to a more comfortable position with a thick book.

"Oh dear," Quanyii said. "That's...well, that's the grimoire I copied the reversal spell from. Isn't that *interesting* ? I wonder…" He shrugged. "Well, I'm just saying that I never did rule *out* someone interfering with my notes. It was something of an adventurous day--and I've never even *heard* of Florian. He could be *any* body. Or any *thing* ."

⁂

Rilla and Marc quarreled in short order. He could not bear to be excluded from their quest to secure Olala and the questionable grimoire, and it took some time for Rilla to convince him that the distance was too great to keep him hydrated; Quanyii could only transport the group one way by magic, and untold hurdles awaited them. He relented only when he ran out of rebuttals. The rest traveled by portal to an attic of the castle, Arum crossing his fingers that nobody had an urgent need for off-season holiday ephemera.

[Illustration by 8rcs.]

“Very well,” he whispered, “I will go to Florian’s room and return with the child and the book.” Three voices chorused in protest. “Honestly! I am not tip-toeing through the halls with three people who look so conspicuous!”

You have heard stories before, so you will not be very surprised that Arum did not get his way. Rilla wrapped someone’s winter shawl around her antlers and secured it with a pin and a feather, as if it were a modish headdress. Damien buttoned his collar high, donned gloves and a simple carnival mask, and swore to keep to low light. Quanyii simply had the presumptuousness to climb into Arum’s pocket, along with an unreasonable amount of gear--including a watch, lip balm, and three different miniature hats. Damien told Arum to stop pouting. Arum insisted that he was doing no such thing. Rilla headed decisively for the door, and they scrambled to keep pace with her. Arum took the lead once through the door, leading the party down stairs, though a corridor, around a corner, and smack into the Queen.

She chirruped in delight, embracing him tightly. He hugged her back, glad to be enough taller than she that Quanyii would not be crushed between them. She quavered a question, followed without pause by a mild chastising chorus on the theme that he had returned without alerting her. He deflected. “I have brought these two, erm, eyewitnesses, from the lands near the swamp! I must take them to Florian without delay, we need to compare information.” The Queen looked at them curiously, before drawing Arum a short distance away and murmuring a question, covering her mouth as she sang. “...Their names? Ah, of course. Luneta and Rhience...Bouquet is the

surname...no relation, I believe, only a coincidence...Mother, that's very rude! You cannot just ask people why they wear masks." (A heavy sigh.) "I believe he was burned by acid...yes, he is very fit nonetheless...yes, she is a very stylish woman... *stop* , I *know* my face is going red...Mother, we have to *go* ." She relented, waving pointedly as Arum pulled his lovers away. Damien waved back, and Rilla smiled warmly.

"Ok," she said, when they were safely out of earshot. "She's *definitely* part of the Keep."

Quanyii stuck his head out of Arum's pocket. "I didn't think a *building* would be affected! Sugarbees, I'm almost tempted to try this again, just to see what *happens* ." He held up his paws, predicting an outburst. "I said *almost* !"

Arum shook his head to clear it. "The Keep is partly a building, and partly a monster. Part of it is here, and we all believe her--it?--to be the Queen." Quanyii cackled. "The rest is pining and unwell, and I *do* hold you responsible."

"Oh, boo. You do such stupid things when the Keep's under the weather."

They had arrived at Florian's door, so Arum pushed Quanyii's head down into the pocket as he knocked. They waited long enough to be sure there would be no answer, and Rilla smoothly picked the lock. "Psst! Olala!" Damien stage-whispered. Arum brought Quanyii to Florian's hearth, where the low table was still set for checkers. He pulled the grimoire out from under the board. Quanyii left his pocket and ran down his arm, tiny feet catching lightly on the wool sleeve, and used his entire body to open the book, rifling through it.

"Can we not take the book and look through it later?"

"Shush, I'm reading! Meanie." Damien and Rilla were occupied, searching the room for potential hiding places of their young friend. Arum watched the door apprehensively, realizing they had not locked it behind them. He approached it to do this, but froze as he reached for the handle.

" *Hide!* " he hissed, Rilla and Damien rolling under the bed and into a wardrobe, Quanyii darting out of sight. Florian opened the door, jumping and crying out when he met Arum's eyes. "My apologies!" Arum forced a cheerful smile. "I came to tell you I got back, and the door was open."

“Was it?” Florian shrugged. “Well, my room is always open to you, dear friend.” He moved to embrace Arum, but made an abrupt gesture like he’d thought better of it, clapping one hand on his shoulder instead. “I am relieved to see you are unharmed. Tell me how you fared in the swamp.”

Arum made an elegant empty-handed gesture. “I found very little. Why don’t we go sit in the garden, and I will tell you what details I have.”

“Sweetheart. It’s raining.”

“Is it?”

“Has been all day.”

“Ah!”

“Are you...okay? You know I won’t bite your head off, Arum.” While Arum chewed this over, a small motion caught his eye. Florian’s bed had a fluffy round white pillow near the foot, which was uncurling itself into the form of something like a cat, something like a dog, and something like a lamb. It looked curiously at Arum, slunk from the bed, and trotted closer, padded feet papping merrily against the floorboards. Arum bent to pet it, in an effort to buy time. The animal looked into his face, meeting his eyes as if weighing him up--and then Arum’s hand was not against fur, but hair, and a small pair of arms was around his neck.

“Lord Arum! Oh, my lord, it *is* you, isn’t it? It’s been months and months since I’ve seen anyone I knew, and nobody seems to be in the right places, and I *did* find Sir Caroline, but s-s-she tried to *eat* me! Or, at least, it was Sir Caroline’s voice, but she was *huge* and scaly, like a tyrantlizard, but with wings, and she blew fire, sort of like how Mr. Talfryn taught me to blow bubbles, except I think it *might* have really come from her throat, so I had to run away, and I got lost, and I met lots of new people, and I stayed with a miller for a little while, which was very interesting, but she hated monsters *so* much, even though she talked an awful lot like a hashihime, or at least the ones I’ve met, I mean she used the same figures of speech, and I ended up leaving, and eventually I met Sir Florian, and I’ve been hiding in this room, but I can’t hide forever, and we don’t know what to *do* !” And she burst into tears.

Arum squeezed Olala close and glanced up at Florian, who looked deeply relieved. “She was reluctant to tell me names,” he explained,

“or you would’ve been reunited weeks ago.”

Olala sniffled. “I was just so scared, because I tried asking for my friends by name when I met the mushroom harvester (they were a while ago), but that backfired pretty spectacularly, and I’ve been trying to do better.”

“I think you three had better come out now,” Arum sighed, still holding her close. Damien and Rilla rushed to hug her as well, Damien discarding his mask on the way. Quanyii hung back; it would be a stretch to sketch him out as sheepish, but his spirit was certainly dampened. Olala recognized them each immediately, bouncing on the balls of her feet in delight and relief.

“And--and is Sir Marc with you?”

“We all regret that he could not make this journey, my child,” Damien told her, tone soothing. “But he will be so pleased to see you again!” Arum was still reacting to the fact that she called the mermaid *Sir* Marc--was he by rights a knight? And, if that was so, what was Arum? He had not had a quiet moment since Quanyii’s kitchen; he could, perhaps, accept that he was a lizard-insect-man (especially sweetened by the idea of having more hands, which could only be useful), but he had given very little thought to the fact that he was, after all, *not* a knight. What a relief! And he was not a witch, either--he would have had his own magic, as a monster. His insides felt strange. He missed his old body, but he also recoiled at the thought of losing the one he had; it was perfectly nice, and he was used to it. And there was another small worry, almost an afterthought: was Arum the monster as attractive to Rilla and Damien as Arum the human? Neither of them were so inhuman in their monster forms that he could not imagine their changed appearance easily, but it might be very different if his hair vanished, to be replaced with a frilly neck.

At least they had once liked him enough to wear his rings.

When he came back to himself, Quanyii was very solemnly apologizing to Olala for how upsetting the past few months had been, and Olala gave him a finger to shake like he would a hand. Arum tried not to listen too closely; sincere Quanyii was disconcerting. Florian sidled over to Arum. “Er, Arum? Isn’t that the guy whose head you cut off?”

“Oh! Well, yes.”

“And his head is just--back on there, huh?”

“I sewed it back on for him.”

“Right, right, gotcha. And the lady with you…?”

“The reindeer.”

“That was *not* going to be my question. No, no, nevermind, I’m just trying to keep up.”

Arum fidgeted. “Florian. Can I trust you? I suppose what I am asking is if you will swear to me that...that you are in truth my friend?”

Florian gave Arum’s booted foot a friendly side-tap with his own. “My *dear* friend. I know none of us really know what we are, or what we have been, but the two things I have been sure of are your love, and my husband’s. I am on your side.”

Arum inhaled slowly. “Very well. There is a grimoire on your table. Can you tell me why you have it?”

Florian’s brow creased. “Oh, I’ve barely looked at those. My husband borrowed a bunch from the library. Arcana is *not* my bag.”

Quanyii waved them closer. “Since you’ve decided to bring your unvetted pal into the mix, I might as well tell you all that I have *terrible* news, cuties!” Olala gasped and clapped her hands over her mouth. The adults, at this point, had grown more jaded. “The reversal spell, as written out here, should’ve gone off without a hitch! Which can *only* mean that my notes *were* tampered with!”

“No wonder you are so cheerful,” Arum grumbled. “You’re pleased that this debacle is less your fault than you previously feared.”

“Ooh, he’s *so* harsh! I don’t know *what* you two see in him! I mean, I used to chalk it up to his long tongue, but even now!”

“Move on!” he snapped.

“There *is* no more. Even *I* don’t know how many hands my notebook passed through that day. If Caroline hadn’t been such a *stickler* , I wouldn’t have needed to break in to begin with! Goodness, *untold* horrors dwell in this place! Just *think* of how many nasties with their own unseemly motivations--”

“Yes, I think we grasp the concept, Quanyii. And to fix it?”

“I’ll need to know who fucked with my notes to do *that* .”

Damien let out a small, agonized squeak. Rilla gave his back a comforting pat. “Hey--Florian, right? Is there any point in asking your husband for thoughts? Since he’s the one with the interest in arcana.”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to help, but it could take a while to find him. I haven’t seen him all day.”

“That’s unusual. Did he come to bed last night?” Arum prodded, something eating at him, not caring how personal the question was.

“I--I’m not sure, I was pretty tired.” Florian paused. “Actually, he wouldn’t have anyway, he has his own room.”

“I...do not think he does, actually.”

“Really? Well, I mean, he must. He never *has* slept here.”

Arum grabbed his shoulders. “Florian, please tell me I am an unobservant cad. I cannot for the life of me remember your husband’s name.”

Florian looked sick. “I...I have no idea. I’m not going to like what this means, am I?”

Quanyii’s little nose twitched. “We need to get Olala out of here.” Olala began to protest that she was perfectly safe among them, and wanted to *help* . And then the lights went out.

⁂

By unspoken consent, everyone reached out and grabbed their neighbors’ hands; Arum had Florian’s and Rilla’s. “Sirs and Miss Rilla?” Olala whispered. “Are you all well?”

“Shh!” Damien replied. “Something’s in here with us.” Arum heard a metallic sound suggesting Damien had unsheathed a knife. The very darkness seemed tangible, as if they had been plunged into a swimming hole full of ink. He could, just barely, see the relative lightness of the windows, but the storm outside was so dense in its own right that it offered no relief. Whatever-it-was was behind him, he was sure of it, but as he whipped his head around, Rilla squeezed his hand painfully, like she was willing herself not to scream.

Florian tried to let go of Arum’s hand, but his friend would not let him. “Matches!” Florian tried to explain, against his ear, but when he spoke, the storm raged louder and the dark of the room swirled--not

visibly, but tangibly--as a herding dog whips around sheep to keep them where it wants them.

Perhaps Quanyii had the same thought, for he snapped, in the voice he addressed Gawain with: “Stop that *right* now!” An ominous, mocking chuckle. “Ha!” Quanyii crowed. “ *Now* I know who you are! Come face us like a grown devil, Jack-of-Shadows!”

Olala whimpered with trepidation. “Mr. Quanyii!”

“Be brave, little half-half. He hasn’t bested us yet!”

The darkness chuckled, and then a pinprick of light appeared, several feet above the hearth, so faint Arum thought he imagined it. But it grew and spread into a line, and then a sparkling outline of a horned shadow, twirling his tail and grinning his uncanny teeth at them. “Olala!” he exclaimed, in a rich and gorgeous voice; a voice that spoke of sweetmeats and thrilling games; and, if you were so minded, of spiced wine and velvet kisses. Poor Florian’s hand shook in Arum’s grip, but Arum had already placed the voice.

Olala, her small, brave face faintly illuminated by the outline of Florian’s so-called husband, lifted her chin. “You’re not going to trick me this time, Mr. Jack.”

“Ohhh, my dear child! What trickery could I possibly need to exact?”

“I don’t know, but I’m quite sure you can think of no end of misdeeds, Mr. Jack. Or even just selfish ones.”

“You wound me, little Olala.” He had no eyes, but the tilt of his head changed, and his attention was plainly fixed on Florian. “ *Gracious* , sweet fellow, *pray* don’t look at me like that! I have been completely proprietous, I’m sure you can agree. When did I ever mislead you? I told you you’re stunning and I adore you. Perhaps there were one or two little misapprehensions--”

“You let me think we were married!”

“Oh, *tut* . I would have explained eventually, once I had fully had my chance to lay out my courtship. This doesn’t need to be the *end* of us, dearest. We have a dinner date only tomorrow night!”

“Consider it canceled!”

Jack sighed heavily. “Be reasonable! You’re to be my prince consort, once I have finished redecorating.”

Florian made a disgusted noise. Rilla broke in: “What *kind* of redecorating?”

Jack swiveled to attend to her. “Dear lady! Oh, I know your face. The pretty herbalist, the one the knight who frets so much loves.” Damien pouted. “I’m going to make this little corner of the world a perfectly beautiful patch of eternal shadow and winter! Maybe a little late fall and early spring, for variety, but certainly a *curated* climate. And some darling gothic furniture strikes me as a good idea, hmm? Flowers all in black, *very* stylish. And the most beautiful man in the world by my side!”

“No.”

“He’ll come around.” Jack winked at Rilla.

“Look at me, asshole!” Florian was angry now; and Arum surged with pride. “I don’t care if you love me. I don’t care that I loved you. And I certainly don’t care what you have to offer me! You will not have my trust again, and I--” his voice broke painfully. Jack reached out to caress his face. “Don’t you *dare* touch me!” To Arum’s considerable surprise, Jack withdrew his hand as if it had been burned. Oh, dear. Maybe Jack really did love him. *Tough* .

In the periphery of his vision, he saw Quanyii tug on Damien’s sleeve until he gave the mouse his dagger. He took the handle in his forepaws, crept to the edge of the table, and--oh, this could not end well--sliced off the spade of Jack’s tail. The shadowy devil howled, a layered scream that hurt Arum’s ears, and the ears of his soul. The darkness poured out of the room in a rush, vanishing up the chimney. Arum inhaled fully for the first time in what felt like hours. Everyone except Quanyii shifted unsteadily, bumping gently against each other and reaching out with hands to reassure themselves they were all in one piece. The witch, for his part, held up his trophy in great satisfaction.”Got ‘em!”

⁂

The light had returned to the room, but the sky outside crackled with a great web of lightning, the air full of tension and static. “Quanyii, what’s the plan, here?” Rilla braced her arms on the table and leaned over the still-open grimoire.

“I have a bit of Jack, so we’ve got *ever* so many options!”

Damien was leaning out a window. “Might I advise we choose the fastest one? It’s only that Jack has climbed to the highest spire and is making ominous gestures with a twig.” He squinted. “I *think* it’s elm.”

“I could fly up there and try to stop him,” Olala offered, but she was dissuaded.

Quanyii grew agitated. “The fastest way I don’t have the equipment for, so I’m trying to think of the *second* -fastest!”

Arum paced. This was a puzzle of gestures, of informing the bent-and-bruised struts of the universe that the situation had changed. Quanyii’s intentions had been perverted to the brink of disaster by Jack-of-Shadows; they had a piece of his body to act as a solvent to his workings. Beyond that, Arum would need symbols. What *mattered* here? The seasons, the wholeness of earth, their ties to each other, their bodies, their memories. It mattered that he loved his home, and a few specific people. It mattered that he had as much control over these things as the march of time would allow. And oh, that was the whole problem, wasn’t it?

“Damien, do you have your ring? The one I gave you?” He did--and Rilla pulled at the simple leather cord around her neck, and retrieved her own scaled ring from it. He accepted the rings, and took their hands. “I love you both, more than I can say.”

[Illustration by taylor-draws-stuff.]

They clung to him. “You’re not allowed to do something stupid, Arum!”

He laughed. “No, fret not, I would rather flee and live, than die and win. I simply thought it important to say. I’m going to the courtyard. You can come, but you must not interfere.”

Quanyii hopped onto his shoulder. “This is *my* responsibility,” he complained.

“I quite agree, witch, but I do not believe you can fix it. Not by this technique. You’ll *tolerate* the spell being broken, but only because you think it ‘went wrong.’ You do not abhor your own part in it.”

“But!”

“I *know* you were only trying to help Olala! It does not *matter* , Quanyii! You cannot reach out and reshape people’s bodies and *minds* without their knowledge or acceptance, as if we were snowmen in your backyard--it doesn’t *matter* that you intended to put us right again!”

The mouse fell silent for long minutes, until the group reached the courtyard. “You’re right, I’m not sorry. But I do apologize.”

Arum grunted. “The watch you left in my pocket,” he said. “It is important to you?”

“Very! It was a wedding present from Caroline.”

“Excellent. You’re not getting it back. I don’t care whether you mind.” Quanyii winced, but Olala had reached out her hand to allow Quanyii to dismount, and he did not argue.

“Good luck, Lord Arum!” Olala chirped, putting her free hand in Damien’s. Rilla had a supportive arm around Florian, whose face was haggard. The Queen was here; she raised a hand in salute, turning her face back to the sky. There were courtiers in a doorway beyond her, begging her to come back inside. The rain fell so heavily that Arum could not clearly see the opposite wall. Still, he wrapped his arms around himself and fought his way to the center of the courtyard, where he had beheaded Damien.

He wore the rings he had received from his partners on each hand, alongside the ones he had given them. Arum did not know how to begin. He was working on instinct, and that would have to be enough. He pulled out Quanyii’s watch, and shut the spade of Jack’s tail inside it, where a keepsake should have gone. “My name,” he said, unsure whether he addressed the court, the storm, or himself, “is Arum, Lord of the Swamp of Titan’s Blooms, familiar to the Keep therin. And I am…” He had to find the *right* words. “I untangle this knot, made by the witch Quanyii and the devil Jack-of-Shadows. I restore...no, I beg your pardon. I reaffirm the correctness, and the justice, of each to their own nature. Let time be the master of time; let the seasons trade between each other in perfect trust; let nature fractal into the infinite variety it delights in most; let us each be reunited with dominion of our…” *original bodies* had come to the tip of his tongue, but he thought better of it. “Our preferred bodies, and readmitted to our memories.” He faltered again. “Er...I, I signify the solemnity of...oh, fuck it. I’m echoing the appropriate circularity with these rings, which I am also going to use as a symbol of how very much I mean this,

because I love the people I exchanged them with, and a few other people besides, and if I did not know them, I would not know the things I know, or treasure the things I treasure. I want this corner of land to be healthy, because it is where we have been happy, and because it is *mine*, and because it is *right*." He could feel it now, the tangle of magic in the palm of his hand. It was much worse than he had thought, and he had not done enough. He could continue monologuing while he unpicked it, but he feared how long that would take.

Summer. He needed heat, and light. He fumbled in his pockets for a match, but the rain put it out at once. The second would not light at all. He cursed--he could not simply go indoors; to change his position would mean starting all over, and Jack was high above their heads, blotting out the stars. The wind was stronger now, roaring in his ears in a nightmarish, pulsing roar. People were shouting, he realized belatedly, looking up.

The dragoness Caroline was the biggest creature he had ever seen; small wonder Quanyii was afraid to fall asleep cuddling her. Her scales were scarlet, refracting the illumination from the lightning web in the sky, and her teeth, when she opened her mouth, were four concentric rows of needlish fangs. "Quanyii!" she roared. "Who should I attack?"

Everyone except Arum pointed up at Jack, but Arum, hands buzzing with magic, twisted a finger to amplify his voice. "Caroline, please, I need a bit of flame first!"

She gave him a baleful eye, but shot off a jet of flame. *Blue* , both more terrifying and more secure than Arum had dared to hope. He tied the invisible ends of the magic knot to Quanyii's pocketwatch, and threw the entire totem into the fire, where it turned to ash. He bent double, hands on knees, panting in relief. The air snapped, and as Caroline surged skyward, something twisted, the courtyard filling with light, and dark, and light again, in dozens of colors and shades. Arum's mother and lovers and friends ran to his side. "You've done it!" Damien whooped.

"How can you tell?"

"Don't you see? We're getting dozens of days' worth of light, in one go! Can you hear that popping noise? Look at the trees! The leaves are catching up!"

Arum slumped against him and Rilla. “We are going to have so much zucchini,” he breathed.

Caroline, above, snapped a screaming Jack-of-Shadows into her jaws before descending with him, struggling like a caught kitten. “That’s my wife!” Quanyii bragged, tears streaming across his cheeks with relief.

Caroline spoke without parting her jaws. “Should I eat him, or confine him?”

Damien sighed. “Better confine him. He’s technically Mira’s problem, and we’ve little idea how he survived your last attempt.” He blinked. “Oh! I’m starting to remember things! How glorious!”

Arum laughed happily, and then passed out.

⁂

He woke in his bed--or, at least, the bed he had slumbered in during his sojourn as a knight-by-default. Damien and Rilla were with him, the poet reading, the healer talking quietly into her recording device. “We’re not back to normal yet,” he observed, in some alarm.

“Hello to you, too,” Damien smiled. “And fret not, Amaryllis and Quanyii believe we shall be in a sleep or two.”

“We’re getting our memories back gradually,” Rilla remarked. “And the weather outside is finally seasonable! Quanyii did a test for atmospheric magic, and she’s pretty sure the spells are unravelling in reverse--seasons, then memories, and our bodies next.”

“Ah,” Arum said, weakly.

“How are you feeling? I diagnosed you with overdoing it, but what do you think?”

He gave her an affirmative gesture. “Come cuddle me,” he pleaded, voice plaintive and soft. They both curled up beside him, under only a light blanket, for it truly was summer-hot. “Why did Caroline even show up?”

Rilla howled with laughter, and Damien had to explain: “We are told that Quanyii forgot to pack a lunch.”

“I see. And all is well?”

“Jack is imprisoned, and everyone is safe.”

He yawned. “I will check on Florian, when I am better. He has become my friend, and I fear he will take this hard. I cannot blame him if he does.” The others hummed assent. “Do we know where we will wake up, if we fall asleep here?”

Rilla shrugged. “No idea, but I expect we’ll be together.” She gave him a penetrating look. “What’s wrong?”

He looked at the ceiling. “Quanyii said I’m a lizard.” Rilla looked perplexed, but Damien kissed Arum’s cheek.

“An extraordinarily handsome lizard, whom we both love very much.” Arum relaxed.

Rilla kissed his other cheek. “Did you think we would prefer you like this?”

“... *Do* you?”

“Honestly? It doesn’t make a difference to me. But I’ve remembered a lot while you were unconscious--I loved you first as *yourself* , a lizard magician inventor monster, and *all* either of us want is the version of you that feels like *himself* .”

Arum smirked. “I am fairly wonderful. Well, I have to be, to keep up with the pair of you.” Damien very gently bade him to sleep, and so Lord Arum did. The world would be right in the morning, and so would he; if for no other reason than that he no longer felt a duty to fit a role lest he be caught wanting and unwanted, but to love himself and find himself loved. Perhaps it was a lesson he had learned before and forgotten; more likely, it was a study that would take a lifetime, but at least this adventure was done.

And so the story ends, making way for your eyes and minds to enjoy another, for our coffers are crammed with stories such as these, and have been for as long as we have whispered to each other to keep away the dark and cold; and so we shall learn our own lessons, and sleep our own sleeps. Now let us find ourselves in perfect peace.

End Notes

SO I really fucking love Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (author unknown). The familial love! The inter-connectivity of life forms! The bi kissing! It's so much fun. There are a lot of good versions of it, including adaptations for all ages, but I suggest the verse translation by Simon Armitage. He made beautiful and evocative choices, while being one of the most accessible translations out there.

There's a movie coming out soon starring Dev Patel! I am very confident of loving it, but it may bear no resemblance to this fic, we'll have to see. I hope they keep the bi vibes!

The extremely good joke I borrowed for the fic summary comes from a piece by Daniel Lavery, which is full of other good jokes: https://the-toast.net/2015/06/03/sir-gawain-and-the-green-knight/

And if you're the sort of person who would enjoy reading a scholarly take, I'm linking a very charming and insightful article by JJ Cohen that I love for talking about the good good nature content in this legend, and for unabashedly loving Morgan. ("True, she also wanted to scare Guenevere to death, and that is not very nice.") http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2015/10/the-love-of-life-reading-sggk-close-to.html

Quanyii is, naturally, Morgan in this fic. Arum is Gawain, Damien the Green Knight, Rilla Lady Bertilak, the Keep both Arthur and the green chapel...and nobody else directly appears in the Gawain version, they're just here because I love them.

You can find me as cartograffiti.tumblr.com! Once again, this fic's artists are 8rcs.tumblr.com, scintillart.tumblr.com, and taylor-draws-stuff.tumblr.com. Check out their other work, and give them likes and reblogs!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!